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The new PETE SELBY  
Short Novel by  
JONATHAN CRAIG

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April—288

# MIKE SHAYNE



APRIL, 1974  
VOL. 34, NO. 5

TWO COMPLETE SHORT NOVELS

EXCITING PETE SELBY THRILLER

## CASE OF THE LAUGHING VIRGIN

by JONATHAN CRAIG

*There was no witness to the murder except one slightly hysterical woman who had apparently just tried to kill herself—and every suspect had an air-tight alibi that couldn't be broken. Until Selby found a reel of film.*..... 2 to 53

NEW MIKE SHAYNE ADVENTURE

## THE VERY RELUCTANT CORPSE

by BRETT HALLIDAY

*The violence after the death seemed to center around one newspaper reporter—Mike Shayne's old friend, Tim Rourke. It was only natural that Shayne should ask Rourke to play bait...but the fish was a killer they couldn't see.*..... 74 to 120

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# Case Of The Laughing Virgin

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by JONATHAN CRAIG

*From the body on the floor to the body in the film strip, the case seemed to grow hotter at every step, even as the trail seemed to be growing colder — and then Selby learned a very strange thing . . .*

THE NAKED girl on the roof was no longer screaming. But she was trying to. She stood just back of the foot-high parapet, head thrown back and fists clenched hard against her bare thighs, her whole body rigid with terror as she tried to force the frozen scream past her throat.

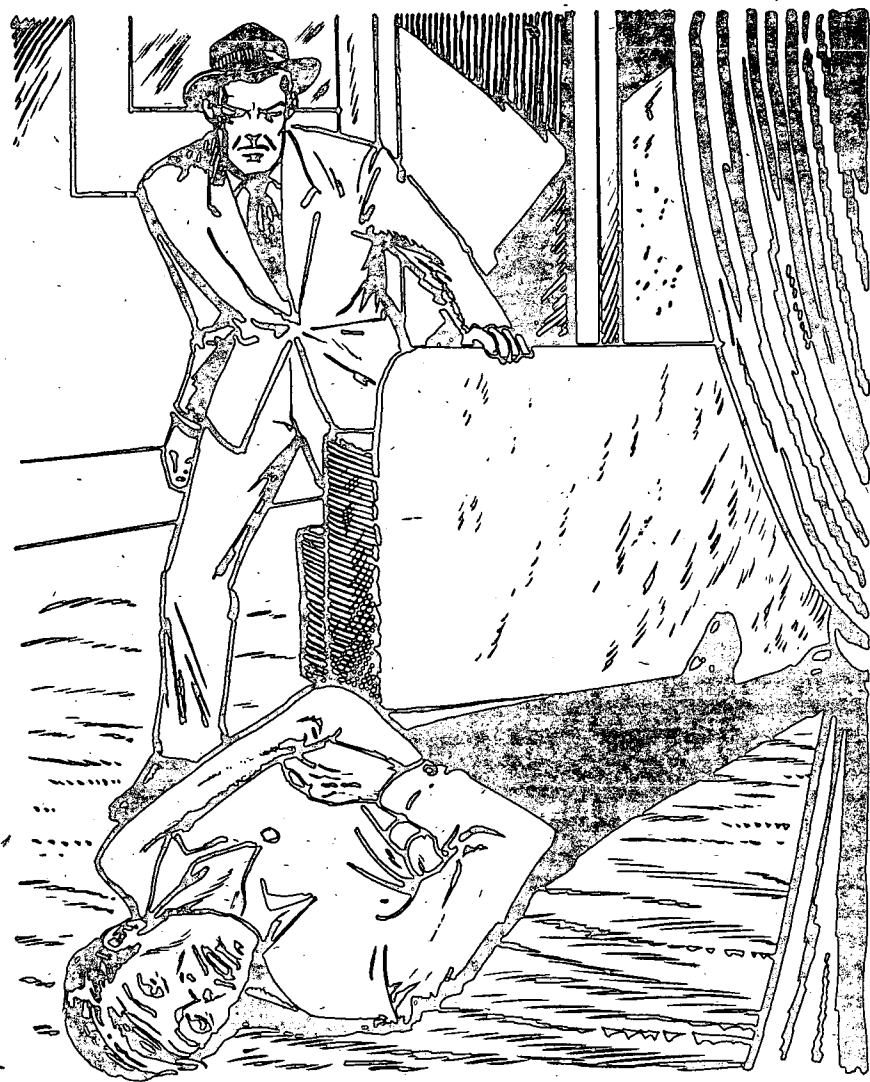
She was a silver blonde, with long, tapering legs, a tiny waist, and the kind of pointed, upthrust breasts that meant she was probably still in her teens.

I opened the kiosk door a little wider, stepped out onto the roof, and motioned to my detective partner, Stan Rayder, to circle around her, just in case. The alarm that had brought us barreling halfway across Greenwich Village to this three-story brownstone on Bleecker Street had said the girl was a jumper.

Although I myself didn't make her for one—still, you can never be sure. The difference between a jumper and a non-jumper can sometimes be



Featuring  
**PETE SELBY**



as little as an unexpected noise or a sudden movement.

She'd heard us. Slowly her chin came down, and then with short, jerky movements of her head, she turned to face us. But she didn't really see us, I knew; she was looking through us and beyond us.

I took a single slow step toward her, paused for a moment, and took another. The girl didn't move. She stared at me unblinkingly, and even when Stan Rayder started off at an angle that would bring him up behind her, her eyes stayed on me.

With Stan already in motion, there was no point in hesitating any longer. I tried to work up the kind of big, friendly, reassuring smile that seemed to be called for, took a deep breath, and walked across the asphalt toward her, as casually as if approaching a naked girl on a rooftop at high noon were something a man did every day of his life.

We almost lost her. With about ten feet remaining between us, her eyelids fluttered and her rigid, quivering body sagged abruptly. If we'd been only another foot apart, and if I hadn't been a fairly fast man on my feet, she'd have toppled over the parapet and ended up on the pavement three floors below.

Even so, it was much too close. At the same instant I grabbed her, I felt my left ankle turn a little, and for a very long and very bad moment I found myself looking straight down into the upturned faces of the crowd beneath us on the sidewalk.

It couldn't have lasted longer than a second or so, but it was long enough to chill the film of sweat along my ribs and across my back. By the time I'd recovered my balance and carried the girl a few steps away from the parapet, my heart was slugging away like an air hammer.

"A close one, Pete," Stan Rayder said softly as he came up to us. "I thought you'd had it."

"Not a chance," I said. "Only the good die young, Stan."

"Very pretty," he said, studying the unconscious girl as I shifted her around to a more comfortable position in my arms. "And she smells pretty, too. Offhand, I'd say it was a blend of Chanel Number Five and Vat Sixty-nine."

"That's bad?" I asked.

He grinned and fell into step beside me as I started back across the roof to the kiosk. Stan's a deceptively thin, deceptively mild, studious-looking young cop with a little premature silver in his crewcut, a

look of perpetual surprise in his gray eyes, and a bomb in both fists.

"I was just making a clinical observation," he said. "And besides, on this girl, even kerosene would smell good."

"Let's keep it clinical," I said. "And while you're resting, how about opening that door a little wider?"

He pushed the kiosk door all the way open, stood aside while I carried the girl through it, and followed me down the steep, narrow stairway to the third-floor corridor.

"Now to find out where she came from," Stan said as I lowered the girl to the floor. "Which reminds me—I wonder where all the gawkers are? You'd think every tenant in the house would be up here by now."

I took off my jacket, spread it over as much of the girl as it would cover, and turned to look down the dimly-lit corridor. "Maybe they're scared," I said.

"Scared? Scared of what?"

"Maybe of the same thing that scared our girl here."

He glanced at her, and then bent down on one knee to peer at her face more closely.

"She was moving her eyelids a little," he said. "I think she might be coming out of it."

There was a half-open door about three quarters of the way

down the hall. "Stay here with her, Stan," I said. "I want to see what's on the other side of that door there."

"My pleasure," he said. "Take your time."

I walked down to the doorway, stood looking about the living room inside for a moment, and then stepped in.

It wasn't the kind of room you'd want to spend much time in if you were subject to nightmares. It had two bright-orange walls, one blood-red wall, and one wall painted dull black with silver lightning flashes zigzagging across it from all directions. Most of the furniture was made of chrome pipe, twisted into futuristic curves and angles and strung with fishnetting dyed pink and green and purple.

The room looked like an explosion in a paint factory, even without the bilious yellow carpet and the dozen or so colored mobiles that festooned the ceiling.

Looking very much out of place was a quite ordinary combination bar and hi-fi cabinet, and scattered about the room were a black sheath dress, a pair of very small black suede pumps, and a few wisps of black lace lingerie.

There was a draped archway in one of the orange walls, with the drapes parted just far

enough for me to see the corner of a bed.

"Police officer," I called. "Anyone that's in there, come out."

Aside from the muted hiss of a needle circling in the safety grooves of a record on the hi-fi's turntable, there was no sound of any kind.

I switched off the hi-fi and walked through the archway to the bedroom, which surprised me by being as commonplace as the living room was otherwise.

Beyond the bedroom was a small bathroom, and beyond that an almost equally small kitchen. But there was no one, and nothing of any immediate interest, in either place.

I started back toward the bedroom. If there was anyone in the apartment, he—or she—would have to be in the bedroom closet or on the floor beneath the bed.

Or so I thought. As it turned out, he was in neither place. He was in the living room, lying on the floor between the sofa and the wall, where he'd been hidden from me by the furniture and the half-open hall door when I came in.

He lay on his back, a handsome, even-featured man in his early forties, with overlong hair the color of wet sand, a pencil-line mustache, and wide-set gray eyes that stared up at me

with the dry, lusterless film of death.

He was lying with both arms folded tightly across his middle, as if he'd been hugging himself against the cold, and spreading out at either side of his forearms were dark blotches, stark and ragged-edged against the white of his sport shirt.

According to the rule book, of course, a cop doesn't touch a body until it's been examined by the Medical Examiner or one of his assistants.

Of course.

I reached down and, very carefully, grasping only the thumbs, lifted his forearms away from his chest.

There were four bullet holes, none of them more than two inches from the others, and all of them made at such close range that the cloth around them was not only stained with burned powder but charred by the muzzle blast.

They were very small holes, and if they turned out to have been made by anything bigger than a .22, I was going to be very much surprised.

I lowered the arms to their original position, walked back to the living room, picked up the black sheath dress and the suede pumps, and went out to where I'd left Stan Rayder and the naked girl.

It was hard to believe that

she was the same girl I'd almost dived off the roof with. She was sitting up now, holding my jacket tightly against the front of her body, watching my approach with just about the same degree of irritation she might have shown had I surprised her while she was taking a sun bath in the raw.

Still, when I reached her, I saw that she was breathing a little raggedly, and that she seemed to have all she could do to keep her lips from trembling.

Stan Rayder was leaning against the wall, studying her bemusedly. "She's okay now, Pete," he said. "She snapped out of it, just like that."

"So I see," I said. I put the shoes down on the floor beside her and dropped the dress across her thighs.

"They're yours, aren't they?" I asked.

She nodded.

"Better put them on," I said. "There'll be a lot of people around here any minute now."

She hesitated for a moment. Then, still holding my jacket in front of her with one hand, she reached for the dress with the other and made a tentative effort to get to her feet. "Look the other way," she said.

Stan and I walked down the hall a few steps and turned to face the open door of the apartment I had just left.



PETE SELBY

"Anybody home down there?" Stan asked me.

"There's a man between the



wall and the sofa in the living room. Somebody hit him four times with a small-caliber gun. You could cover all four wounds with a dollar bill." I gestured back toward the girl. "She say anything?"

"Just her name. She says it's Doris Hagen. And she didn't even say that until just before you got back. She came out of it all at once, but she'd lost her voice. Which figures. The way she was screaming up on that roof, she's lucky to get it back at all."

I'd been listening to the soft, slithering rustle of the dress as the girl got into it, but now the sound had stopped.

"You about ready, Miss Hagen?" I called over my shoulder.

She didn't say anything, but her heels clicked toward us, and we turned around. She was carrying my jacket. She handed it to me and I put it on. Even with nothing whatever beneath it, the sheath dress fit her like so much shimmering black lacquer. How she'd managed to get into it while wearing the lacy black lingerie I'd seen in the living room of the apartment, I couldn't guess.

She bobbed her chin almost imperceptibly and raised a small, slender hand to brush the silver-blond hair back from her forehead. "I really

threw a fit up there on the roof, didn't I?" she said.

"It happens," I said. "This is my precinct partner, Detective Rayder. My name's Selby. We'll be carrying this homicide all the way."

"He's—dead, then?"

"You didn't know that?"

She looked toward the open doorway. "No," she said. "I was hoping he..." She broke off, her eyes suddenly very bright.

"Who did the shooting?" I asked, making it almost casual. "You?"

"Me? Oh, no. God, no. It wasn't me."

"Who, then?"

"I don't know."

"You were there, weren't you?"

"Yes, but I... I mean, I was in the apartment, but not in the living room. I was in the bedroom."

"You didn't see the person that killed him?"

"No."

"You have any idea who it was?"

"No."

"Whose apartment is it? Yours or his?"

"His."

I turned toward the open doorway. "We'd better go inside," I said. "After you, Miss Hagen."

"Do we have to?"

"You won't have to look at

him," I said. "The body's between the sofa and the wall, where you can't see it." I gestured toward the door.

She hesitated, then squared her shoulders and walked resolutely to the doorway. At the threshold she hesitated again, then quickly stepped inside, sat down in the first fishnet chair she came to, and crossed her legs.

I drew another chair close to hers, got out my notebook, and sat waiting while Stan made a fast inspection of the body. When he'd finished and had taken a seat on a hassock, I said, "What's the dead man's name, Miss Hagen?"

"Larry. Larry Yeager."

I wrote the name in my book and glanced over at Stan. "How about calling Barney?" I asked. "Tell him what we've got and ask him if he'll start the ball rolling on this with Communications."

Barney was Acting-Lieutenant Barney Fells, the commander of the Sixth Precinct detective squad, and Stan's and my immediate superior.

Stan crossed to the phone, lifted the handset by hooking his left index finger beneath the flange at the receiver end—a method that neither leaves nor obliterates fingerprints—and began to dial.

## II

BY PHONING Barney Fells we'd be saving time, but we would not, of course, be going by the book. In New York, the first police officer on the scene of a crime is usually a member of the uniform Force, and SOP is for him to immediately phone the Communications Bureau at police headquarters on Centre Street.

In the present case, however, Barney Fells would take care of the call to Communications, and they in turn would dispatch an ambulance and notify the Sergeant on Patrol, the Medical Examiner's office, the District Attorney's office, the Bureau of Identification, the Photographic Bureau, the crime lab, and others.

"Can I get my things?" Doris Hagen asked.

I nodded, and while she was about it, I looked in the outside handbag that had been lying on the coffee table. There wasn't any gun in it. I handed it to her, and she stuffed her underthings and stockings into it.

"First," I said, when she was settled in her chair again, "let's establish the relationship."

She looked at me sharply. "What?" Her position in the chair had caused her dress to slide halfway up her thighs, but she made no effort to pull it

down again. I got the feeling that little things like that made no difference to her, either way.

"You his girl friend?" I asked.

"I guess you could say that. We weren't engaged or anything, though."

"You live here with him?"

"No."

Stan Rayder finished with his call and sat back down on the hassock. "I kept one ear tuned in on you," he said. "Go ahead."

"Suppose you take it from the beginning, Miss Hagen," I said. "Tell us exactly what happened."

She took a deep breath, shifted her position in the chair slightly, and crossed her legs the other way. Her skirt rode up another couple of inches, and stayed there.

"Well," she said, "there was this knock on the door. The front door downstairs stays open all the time. So anybody who wants to come up here, well all he has to do is do it."

"When was this?" I asked.

"Just before it happened. About ten minutes of noon."

"Where was Mr. Yaeger at the time?"

"Here, in the living room. I was in here, too."

"I thought you told us you were in the bedroom."

"That was later. When this knock came, I was in here with Larry." She paused. "Look—you said tell you exactly what happened, right?"

I nodded.

"All right, then. I'd been doing—well, like a strip. It was a little game we played sometimes. What we'd do, we'd have a drink together, and then I'd take my dress off. And then we'd have another drink, and I'd take off something else. And so that's what we were doing this morning when somebody knocked on the door. I went out to the bedroom because I didn't have anything on. And poor Larry—he went to the door to open it."

"You didn't actually watch him open it?"

"No."

"And then?"

"Well, I'd no sooner got into the bedroom when I heard the shots. I almost died. I thought whoever had shot him would come in the bedroom and shoot me, too."

"Why?"

"Because when he saw my clothes out there, he'd know I had to be somewhere around. He'd think I saw him shoot Larry, and he'd have to kill me too to keep me from telling."

"You say 'he.' You hear a man's voice?"

"Well, no. I... Well, natur-

ally, I just assumed it was a man."

"But now that you think back on it, there's no reason to think it couldn't have been a woman?"

"Well, no. I guess not."

"How long was it before you went up on the roof?"

"Just a few seconds. Just as soon as I could move again."

"Weren't you afraid the killer might still be in the living room, or out in the hall?"

"I didn't go out that way. I went out the bedroom window and climbed up the fire escape." She paused. "After that, all I remember is trying to yell for help. But I couldn't say anything. Any words, I mean. All I could do was scream."

"What do you do for a living, Miss Hagen?"

"Whatever I have to," she said. "Sometimes I model a little. Sometimes I do other things." She shrugged. "You know how it is."

I looked over at Stan. "Feel like knocking on a few doors?" I asked. "Maybe some of the other tenants saw or heard something."

"There aren't any other tenants," Miss Hagen said. "Larry was the only one."

"In a house this size?"

"It belongs to Old Lady Gotrocks, herself. She's in Europe. And if you want to meet a real

nut, she's your girl. You ought to see her apartment downstairs. She's got it painted even crazier than this one is."

"Let's get a little information on Mr. Yeager," I said. "He married?"

"No."

"Divorced?"

"Not that I know of. He never said."

"You know any of his family?"

"There isn't any. At least, that's what he told me."

"What kind of work did he do?"

"He was an actor."

The phone rang, and Stan walked over to answer it. "Hello? ... Oh, hi, Barney... They did? Fine... He was, eh? ... Yeah... uh-huh... Yeah, I've got it. Mrs. Reba Daniels, Paragon Apartments... You too, Barney, and many thanks."

"What was that all about?" I asked as he hung up and returned to the hassock.

"Barney asked BCI for—"

"Asked who?" Miss Hagen said.

"The Bureau of Criminal Information," Stan told her. "Barney is Pete's and my boss, Miss Hagen. He asked BCI for checks on you as well as your Mr. Yeager."

"How nice of him," she said. "And what'd he find out?"

"About you, nothing," Stan said.

"What about Yeager?" I asked.

"He had a yellow sheet. Not that it amounted to much. He got into a hassle with his wife once and—"

"Wife?" Miss Hagen said. "What wife?"

Stan ignored her. "This was way back in 1950, Pete. All that happened was that Yeager and his wife got into a pretty loud argument, and the neighbors called the police. Yeager was drunk and took a swing at one of the cops—which explains the yellow sheet. BCI figured we'd be asking for a check on the wife, too, so they went ahead and made one. Her first name's Reba. Since she was married to Yeager, she's been married and divorced a second time. A contractor named Arnold Daniels. She's living at the Paragon Apartments, under the name of Reba Daniels."

I wrote down the name and address and turned back to Miss Hagen. "Mr. Yeager in trouble of any kind?" I asked.

"Not so far as I know, he wasn't."

"He have any enemies?"

"Well... not enemies, exactly. He wasn't getting along so well with Mr. Eads, though."

"Who's Mr. Eads?"

"He's the man who wrote the

play Larry was going to have a part in. Warren Eads. I don't know what the trouble was, but Larry sure didn't like him. I heard him blessing Mr. Eads out on the phone one day. I never saw Larry so mad in all the time I knew him."

I put my notebook away and got to my feet. "That'll do for now, Miss Hagen," I said. "Stan, let's see what we can find."

Stan took the living room and I took the bedroom. I was just finishing up when Stan called from the living room. "C'mere a minute, Pete."

He was down on his hands and knees, about two feet to the left of the hall door. "Take a look," he said, pointing to a narrow, inch-and-a-half shard of green glass lying propped against the edge of the carpet. "Miss Hagen swears it wasn't there when she vacuumed this room, just before she and Yeager started their little strip game."

I knelt down beside Stan, picked up the shard, and turned it over in my fingers. "It's a piece of lens from a pair of sunglasses," I said.

"No sign of a struggle," Stan said as he straightened up. "Not that that means there wasn't one. It looks to me like the glasses belonged to the killer. Yeager probably opened



the door, saw the gun, made a grab for it, and the killer's glasses got knocked off and stepped on. Then the killer shot Yeager, picked up what was left of the glasses, and haul-tailed out of here."

I slipped the green shard into my pocket and stood up.

"Miss Hagen, did Yeager have a safe-deposit box somewhere?" I asked.

"I don't know," she said. "Why?"

"We didn't find any personal papers," I said. "You know where he had his bank account, if he had one?"

She moved one shoulder just enough to qualify as a shrug. "Beats me," she said disinterestedly, leaning back in the chair to stare up at one of the colored mobiles rotating lazily against the ceiling. "The things I don't know about that guy would fill a book. A big one."

We were interrupted then.

There was a sudden blur of men's voices in the foyer down below, and then the pound and creak of heavy feet coming up the stairs.

"I was beginning to wonder where everybody was," Stan said, glancing at his wrist watch. "They must have come by way of Bluefield, West Virginia."

"And from the sound of them, they brought half the cops in



STAN RAYDER

West Virginia with them," I said.

Stan shook a cigarette from his pack, lit it, blew an almost perfect smoke ring ceilingward, and sighed softly.

"Well," he said, "So now the fun begins."

### III

THE FUN BEGAN, all right. The first group of arrivals was soon followed by a second, and within ten minutes the small apartment was crowded with more than two dozen men, only about half of whom had any

real business there. The others were visiting royalty from other precincts—lieutenants and captains, most of them—who had heard about the squeal and dropped in to say hello to one another.

While the Assistant Medical Examiner made his preliminary examination of the body, and the print men and photographers set up shop with their dusting powders and cameras, I got busy on the phone.

Hooking a finger beneath the flange of the handset, as Stan had done earlier, I called Headquarters and asked for the assignment of a squad of patrolmen to search the neighborhood for the murder gun. Next, I asked to be switched over to BCI, and requested an expedited check on Warren Eads, the playwright with whom, according to Doris Hagen, Yeager had had some kind of feud.

I held the line while the check was made, and a few minutes later BCI called back to report that Eads had no record. Then I had BCI switch me over to still another office, and asked that detectives be assigned to check with all the banks in the metropolitan area to see whether Yeager had rented a safe-deposit box.

Then I drew Stan Rayder over to a corner of the living room. "I've been thinking about

that piece of lens," I said. "If it was ground to a doctor's prescription, the way a lot of sunglasses lenses are, we just might be able to trace it."

"How so?"

"Well, say the killer wanted that lens replaced. All he'd have to do would be to ask the doctor who prescribed the glasses for him in the first place. The doctor would have the prescription on file. All he'd have to do would be to pass it along to whatever optical outfit ground his lenses for him. And so, if we put all the manufacturing opticians on the watch-and-wait for that particular prescription, we—"

"Just a minute," Stan said. "That's all very well. But just how do you think we're going to get the prescription in the first place?"

"We've got one of the top lens experts in the country, right in our own lab," I said. "Ruby Wyman. By analyzing the shard you found, he might be able to reconstruct the prescription the lens was ground by."

Stan shook his head dubiously. "I like the idea fine," he said. "What I don't like are the odds against it."

I walked over to the chief of the tech crew, gave him the shard, told him what I wanted Ruby Wyman to do with it, and asked him to take it back to

the lab with him when he and his men had finished at the apartment.

"Hey, Selby!" Doris Hagen called out suddenly. "How about me? What am I supposed to do—sit in this chair until I take root or something?"

"Relax, Miss Hagen," Stan told her. "We'll get around to you in a minute."

"And a damn long minute too, I'll bet," she said petulantly.

Stan came over to where I stood and lowered his voice. "What about her?" he asked. "You going to hold her as a material witness, or what?"

"Let's make it protective custody," I said.

"Well, you'd better get set for some fireworks. Man, what a squawk she'll make when you give her the news."

"Not me, Stan. You."

"How come? You going somewhere?"

"I thought I'd take a crack at the guy that wrote the play Yeager was supposed to be in. Warren Eads."

I looked in the Manhattan directory, found that Eads lived at the Amador Hotel, and called him there. The desk clerk told me he was out, but that he had left a phone number where he could be reached. I called the number, listened to the click of the receiver being

taken off the hook, and then to twenty seconds of the mixture of voices and clinking glassware that can come only from a bar.

"Sully's Taproom," a husky Irish voice said. "Sorry to keep you waiting."

"That's all right," I said. "I was supposed to meet a friend there, but I've forgotten the address."

"Thirty-sixth and Third," the voice said. "Hurry over."

"I'll do that," I said, and hung up.

"Hey, Selby," Doris Hagen yelled again. "Your minute was up half an hour ago."

"I'll check with you in an hour or so, Stan," I said.

"Do that, Pete. It gets lonely around here at times."

"You've got Miss Hagen, don't forget."

He winced. "Don't remind me," he said.

I went downstairs, got into the unmarked police Plymouth we had left at the curb, and headed for Sully's Taproom and a talk with Warren Eads.

SULLY'S Taproom was just another Third Avenue bar. The bartender was working hard and sweating hard. He came up to where I stood at the street end of the bar, knuckled some of the sweat out of his eyes, and stood looking at me with

one eyebrow raised questioningly.

"Warren Eads been in?" I asked.

He jerked a thumb toward the rear of the room. "Last booth on the left."

I thanked him and walked back. A middle-aged man with a moon face, very pink skin and pale red hair was sitting with a small, lush-bodied brunette. The man had one arm around the girl and seemed to be grazing on her ear. The girl had long, ragged bangs and tilted brown eyes, and judging from the pleased little sounds she was making, she liked the grazing just fine.

I slid onto the seat across from them. The moon-faced man looked over, then back at the girl.

"You know this guy, June?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"Beat it, bud," the man said, going back to his nuzzling. "This booth's taken."

I got out my billfold and showed him my shield. "My name's Selby," I said. "Are you Mr. Eads?"

He looked at the patsy, sat up a little straighter, looked at it again, and reached for his drink. "Yes, I'm Eads," he said. "What about it?"

I glanced at the brunette. "Mind leaving us alone for a

few minutes, miss?" I asked her.

"Stay where you are, June," Eads said. "This is Miss June Courtney, Selby. She's my fiancée. Anything you've got to say to me, she can hear too."

I reached for a cigar, bit the end off it, and sat rolling it around in my fingers without lighting it.

"Never mind the big dramatic pause," Eads said, his pink face getting a shade pinker. "What's the story?"

"You know a man named Larry Yeager?" I asked.

"Sure I know him. Why?"

"What were you and Yeager having trouble about?"

"Who said we were?"

"I'm only doing a job, Mr. Eads," I said. "If you want to talk to me here, fine. If you'd rather talk to me at the station house, say so."

Eads' face was no longer pink; it was out-and-out red. He took a quick swallow of his drink and set his glass back down so hard I wondered it didn't break.

"Larry wants more sides," he said.

"He what?"

"Sides," Eads said. "Speeches. He's going to be in a show we're doing. He wants us to build up his part."

"Which we absolutely will not do," the brunette put in.

"He's the original no-talent

kid," Eads said bitterly. "A zero."

"That's the only trouble you've having with him?" I asked.

"That's all. But believe me, brother, it's enough."

"I thought the director was the one who decided who said what," I said.

"June, here, is the director, Selby. She's also the producer."

"Courtesy of my father," June said. "He's an old moneybags."

"If Yeager is such a zero," I said, "why'd you hire him in the first place?"

Eads and June glanced at each other. Then June shrugged and Eads said, "Call it temporary insanity."

"The trouble is, we can't fire him," June said. "He has a run-of-the-show contract." She grimaced. "He's such a miserable thing. He really is."

"June's a lady," Eads said. "Naturally she uses very polite language. What she means is, Yeager's a no-good son of a bitch."

"Among other things," June said.

"He's a real natural-born trouble-maker," Eads said.

"Any time he can irritate you, he does it. Any time he can embarrass you, he does. Any time he can change two friends into a couple of enemies, he

does that. Ever since we put him into *Grade A*, he's done nothing but—"

"That's the name of your show?" I asked. "*Grade A*?"

"Yes," June said. "It's about the people on a big dairy farm in Minnesota. It takes place at the time of the county fair, and—"

"Never mind, June," Eads said. "The sooner Mr. Selby finishes his little third degree, the sooner he'll go away."

"Aside from being an all-around nice guy," I said, "did Yeager have any real enemies?"

"Just how real?" Eads asked with a grin.

"Real enough to want him dead."

He stared at me a long moment, his moon face as devoid of expression as a pink balloon. Then he let his breath out very softly and nodded. "So that's what happened," he said, as if to himself. "Well, I'll be damned."

June Courtney sat very still. Her lips moved as if she were about to say something; then she caught herself, raised her glass, and drank steadily until it was empty.

"Why didn't you say he was dead to begin with?" Eads asked. "How come you talked as if he were still alive?"

"That's the way I wanted to



handle it," I said. "What about those enemies?"

He shrugged. "Yeager was an easy guy to hate, all right. But kill him? Maybe somebody did hate the buy that much, I don't know."

I looked at the girl. "How about you, Miss Courtney?"

She shook her head, and then sat looking down into her empty glass, revolving it slowly with the tips of her fingers.

The smile at the corners of Eads' eyes had finally reached his mouth. "God bless all happy endings," he said. "Drink up, June. We've lost our number one headache."

"My glass is empty," June said, her face brightening a little. "See?"

"Here," Eads said. He reached for her glass, poured a little of his own drink into it, and handed it back to her. "Happy days!"

"Happy days," June said. They touched glasses, smiled at each other, and drank.

"Well, now," Eads said. "Things are looking up again."

"I didn't realize I'd brought such good news," I said.

"Well, you did," Eads said. "Everybody will be better off now—including Larry Yeager."

"Yes," June said, pressing up close against Eads. "It's the best thing that could have happened."

Eads laughed. "Why be hypocritical?" he said. "Have a drink, Selby. Join the celebration."

"Thanks just the same," I said as I slid out of the booth and turned in the direction of the street door. "Some other time."

"Sorry you can't stay," Eads said. "See you on opening night, right?"

"Of course," I said.

I walked out to the Plymouth, got inside, and sat there mulling things over for a while.

Since I was already in the neighborhood, I decided I might just as well have a talk with Larry Yeager's ex-wife.

I took out my notebook and found the entry I'd made about her at Yeager's apartment, but it didn't tell me anything I hadn't remembered. Her first name was Reba, and after divorcing Yeager she had married a man named Arnold Daniels and was now divorced from him too.

#### IV

THE WOMAN who answered my knock on the door of apartment 4D had the kind of beauty that makes you look a second time to make sure your eyes weren't kidding you the first time. She was about

thirty, with gray-green eyes beneath incredibly long lashes, shoulder-length auburn hair with gold highlights in it, and the body of a girl of eighteen.

There wasn't any question about the body. She was wearing a white shorts-and-halter getup which, had she worn it on the street, would have gotten her arrested.

"Mrs. Daniels?" I asked.

She nodded. "What is it, please?"

"Detective Selby," I said, showing her my shield. "I'd like to talk to you for a few minutes. May I come in?"

"Yes, of course." She held the door for me as I entered, then closed it and leaned back against it. "What's happened?"

"All right if we sit down?"

She crossed to a white leather sofa, and sat down at one end of it. I sat down in one of the matching leather chairs and got out my book.

I'd noticed an almost inaudible whining sound when I came in, but I'd thought it had come from the street. Now I realized it was in the room itself.

"What's that?" I asked. "It sounds like some kind of motor."

"It is," she said, smiling a little. "Don't you recognize a Mercedes when you hear one?"

"Not every time," I said.

"It's on a record," she said,

gesturing toward a console at the far end of the room. "I turned it down before I answered the door."

"I see," I said. "And you sit around listening to the sound of car engines on records?"

"Sometimes," she said. "We all do. We sports car buffs. I have an Austin-Healey myself." She gestured again, this time toward a glass cabinet filled with loving cups and plaques and silver platters. "Those are some of the things I've won. Not in races, though. Rallies and gymkhanas. *Concours d'Élégance*. That sort of thing." She drew one bare leg up beneath her and leaned back against the cushion. "Just what was it you wanted to talk to me about?"

"Larry Yeager," I said.

"Larry?" She smiled at me questioningly. "In heaven's name, why?"

"You were married to him once, weren't you?"

"Why, yes. But that was ages ago. I haven't even talked to the man in—why, it must be all of ten or twelve years."

"I see."

"Has something happened to him?"

"He's been killed," I said. "Murdered."

She drew her breath in sharply. "Larry? Murdered? Oh, how dreadful!"

"Most murders are," I said.

"Do you know who did it?"

"No."

She looked down at the floor, shaking her head, her eyes withdrawn and remote. "Larry dead," she said softly. "Somehow it just doesn't seem possible. He was always so...so *alive*."

"You said you hadn't talked to him in ten or twelve years, I said. "Does that mean you hadn't even seen him in all that time?"

"I'd seen him, yes. But never to talk to. I saw him on the street a few times, but he didn't see me." She paused. "We were together only a few months, you know. We got married just before the war in Korea broke out. Larry was recalled to active duty right away. By the time he came out, we both knew we'd made a mistake. We got a divorce."

"I understand he had no living relatives."

"That's right. He had no one at all."

"I wonder if you'd mind doing the police a favor, then. In cases like this, we're supposed to have a next-of-kin identification. Which means we've got a problem."

"I understand," she said. "I'll be glad to make the identification for you. Would you want me to do it now?"

"Not right this minute," I said. "First, I'd like to find out a little about Larry."

She sighed. "It's all so strange," she said. "It's almost as if I hadn't ever been married to him at all. Almost as if I'd never even known him. I—I just don't feel anything." She smiled faintly. "I suppose that sounds pretty terrible, doesn't it? But it's true. I simply don't feel anything at all."

"Basically, what kind of person was he?"

She thought about it for a moment. "Well, if you had to say he was one thing more than any other, it would be that he was completely self-centered. He was the most completely selfish person I've ever known."

"Can you think of any habits or ways of his that might have led to trouble?"

She ran the tip of a small pink tongue across her upper lip very slowly, and then shook her head.

"No," she said.

I put my notebook away. "I appreciate your help, Mrs. Daniels," I said. "Now, if you'd be good enough to make that trip to Bellevue, we—"

"Bellevue?"

"That's where Manhattan homicides are autopsied. Larry's body ought to be there by now. I'll arrange for a car to

pick you up and bring you home again."

She nodded, got to her feet, and walked toward a door at the rear of the room. "I'll be only a minute," she said. "I want to put on something a little more appropriate."

The door closed behind her, and I went over to the telephone table and made arrangements for her trip to Bellevue. Then, while I waited for her to dress, I decided to call Stan Rayder at Larry Yeager's apartment and see whether there had been any new developments. But I had, I discovered, forgotten to write down Yeager's phone number. I looked around for a directory, but I couldn't find one.

I walked over to the door Reba Daniels had closed behind her. "Mrs. Daniels?" I called.

"Yes?"

"I can't seem to find your phone book."

"I must have dragged it in here with me again," she said. "Yes, here it is. Whose number did you want, Mr. Selby? I'll look it up for you?"

"Larry Yeager's," I said.

There was a short silence; then she called out the number, and I went back to the phone and dialed Yeager's apartment. Stan Rayder answered on the second ring.

"Pete, Stan," I said. "Any-



thing new happen over there?"

"Nothing important," he said. "Doris Hagen's on her way to the slammer, and Yeager's body was on *its* way to Bellevue half an hour ago."

I told him about my talk with Warren Eads and June Courtney.

"Where are you now?" Stan asked.

"Reba Daniels' apartment. She's going over to Bellevue to make our ID for us."

"Good. She give you any dope on Yeager?"

"No. I've been drawing blanks ever since I left you."

"There was a call for you. Barney passed it along from the squad room. Whoever it was that called left his number, but he wouldn't give his name." He told me the number and I wrote it down.

"Thanks," I said. "I'll give him a call." I said so long, depressed the receiver for a moment, and dialed the number he had given me.

"Yeah?" a man's voice said.

"This is Pete Selby," I said. "Someone wanted me to call him at that number."

"It was me. G-Man Gault. Remember me?"

I remembered him, and I ought to have remembered his voice as well. He was a roving bootlegger and part-time stoolie named Donald Gault, but much

more widely, and variously, known as G-Man, Creep Eye, and Gin Bag. The last name was due to the fact that he always wore an outsize trench-coat, on the inside of which were sewn several rows of pockets the exact size of pint liquor bottles.

"I remember you, Gault," I said. "What's on your mind?"

"I hear you caught the Yeager squeal," he said. "I think I got something for you on it."

"Fine. What is it?"

"Chief, do you know a cat named Dixie Ryan?"

"Yes."

"Well, that Dixie is a man you should hit right now. I mean suddenly, chief. From what I heard, Dixie had been laying it down that he was going to cut Yeager up real good."

"Why?"

"All I know is it had something to do with a movie. Dixie runs a stag show once a week regular, you know. So maybe it was one of his he-and-she movies."

"You know where Dixie's hanging out these days?"

"Sure. He's padding down upstairs at the Poor Boy Bar, on West Fourth Street."

"Thanks," I said. "I'll look him up."

"And listen, chief. If you hit



the old jackpot, don't go forgetting who gave you the combination."

"I never forget a favor," I said, and hung up.

I walked over to the door Reba Daniels had closed behind her. "I'll be leaving now, Mrs. Daniels," I said. "That car ought to be here any minute. And thanks again for your help."

"Not at all," she said. "Good-by, Mr. Selby."

I let myself out of the apartment and walked down the corridor to the stairway.

G-Man Gault was a reliable stool pigeon. If he said that Dixie Ryan had threatened Larry Yeager's life, Dixie had very probably done just that.

The big question was why.

## V

DIXIE RYAN'S room over the Poor Boy Bar contained a neatly-made day bed, a small dresser, a kitchen table with a movie projector on it, about two dozen wooden folding chairs stacked against one wall, and nothing else.

"Those chairs for your stag-show customers, Dixie?" I asked as he closed the door behind me.

"Stag shows?" he said. "Me? You've been listening to the wrong birds, Selby."

Dixie Ryan had once been a pretty fair club fighter, back in the days when there were such things. Now he was a hard-bitten, jack-of-all-crimes character who had been suspected of everything from stealing pennies off newsstands to murder. His ring-ruined features showed nothing, but beneath their tracery of scar tissue, his eyes were as cold and bright as pale blue ice.

"The same birds told me you threatened Larry Yeager," I said.

"So what if I did?"

"He's dead," I said. "Murdered."

Dixie stared at me. "No lie?" he said. "And so who's supposed to have killed him? Me?"

"That might depend on where you were around noon," I said. "Say, from half-past eleven to half-past twelve."

"No sweat there," he said. "I was downstairs in the bar. You don't believe me, ask them."

"You can count on it," I said. "What were you and Yeager having trouble about?"

"Maybe I don't feel talkative."

"And maybe a little time in the tank would change all that."

"On what charge?"

"I could think up half a dozen in about that many seconds," I said. "But this isn't a bust,

Dixie. I'm not interested in your damn stag show. The only thing that interests me is Larry Yeager."

He stood there, not moving, studying my face as carefully as a jeweler appraising a diamond necklace.

"Hell," he said at last. "You've leveling, aren't you?"

"All the way," I said.

He shrugged. "All right, then. It was over a film. A stag film. I showed it one night, along with a couple or three others. Yeager got in a hell of a sweat to buy it. He was so hot-tempered up about it he was damn near bug-eyed."

"He say why?"

"No. I asked him, but all he did was start trying to knock me down on my price."

"And how much was that?"

"A grand."

"A grand? For a stag film?"

"I didn't say it was worth any grand. It wasn't. But when I saw how hot the guy was, naturally I hyped the price up on him. It only cost me a hundred."

"That's a pretty stiff markup. What happened?"

"Well, I told him it was a grand or nothing. Then he said, well, how about renting it to him for a week? And I said okay, but it'd cost him a hundred bucks, and if he wasn't back with it inside a week, I'd

come and get it. So he gave me a yard, and I gave him the film, and that was that."

"But he didn't bring it back on time?"

"No. And that's what the trouble was about. But I was just trying to throw a scare into him." He paused. "Anyhow, he said if I'd wait just two more days, he'd have the whole thousand for me. I thought he was conning me, naturally. But he wasn't. Two days later, damn if he doesn't show up with a grand. I was so surprised I almost forgot to count it while he was still here."

"Where'd you get the film, Dixie?"

"From Fred Beaumont. You remember Beaumont, don't you? That old joker the papers made so much over about ten years ago. You know, with what they called that sex club up in the Bronx and all?"

"I remember," I said. "I thought he was still in jail."

"He got out about two months ago. I bought the film off him a couple of days after he hit the street. He told me he made it just before he went in, ten years ago."

"You know where he might live now?"

"The last I saw him, he was down in some flea-bag flop on the Bowery. The Palace, I think it was."

"Thanks, Dixie," I said as I turned to leave. "I'm glad to hear you aren't running stag shows, after all."

"Who, me?" he said. "I'd never even think of such a thing."

Downstairs in the bar I talked to enough people to satisfy myself that Dixie had been there at the time of Yeager's murder. Then I called the squad room to see whether there had been any messages for me.

A little to my surprise, the phone was answered by Stan Rayder. "I thought you'd still be over at Yeager's apartment," I said.

"I just got here. Pete, we got a break. They found the gun."

"Good," I said. "Where?"

"Beneath a parked car, about half a block from Yeager's building. It's a .22 Smith & Wesson Masterpiece." He sounded mildly excited—which, for Stan Rayder, was a very rare thing—"And not only that, but we know who it belongs to."

"I wouldn't have thought Ballistics would have had time to—"

"Oh, but they did," he said. "Their test slug and the slugs from Yeager's body all came out of the same gun. It's registered to a buy named Earl Lambert, 834 East 31st Street."

"You check him through BCI?"

"Sure. Nothing on him, though."

"You think Mr. Lambert might enjoy a little visit from us?"

"There's no doubt about it."

"Then suppose I pick you up in front of the station house in fifteen minutes. Okay?"

"Right. And listen, Pete. Take your time but hurry. We don't want to keep the man waiting."

It took me no time to hurry, and less time to reach Lambert's.

A big delivery truck was just pulling away from the curb in front of Earl Lambert's apartment building, and so finding a parking space for the Plymouth was, for once, no problem.

I looked along the name cards beneath the mailboxes until I found Lambert's apartment number, and then Stan and I rode the self-service elevator up to the seventh floor and walked along the corridor to 710.

The door was opened by a young man with a couple of big cowlicks in his dark chestnut hair, a pleasantly homely face with a lot of laugh wrinkles at the corners of the eyes, and a broad-shouldered, hipless body shaped like a wedge.

"Mr. Lambert?" I asked.

He nodded, smiling tentatively.

"Police officers," I said. "My name's Selby. This is Detective Rayder."

Lambert's smile wavered a little, but he held the door open a bit wider and motioned us inside.

"You know a man named Larry Yeager?" I asked.

He said the name over to himself, then shook his head. "No, I can't say that I do. Why?"

"Where were you around noon today?"

"Here. Listen, what's—?"

"There's a .22 Smith & Wesson registered in your name. Mind getting it for us?"

"It—I don't have it. It was stolen."

"I see."

"I'm telling you the truth. It was in a footlocker down in the basement. Somebody broke in down there and stole it. They stole a lot of other stuff down there, too."

"What was it doing in a footlocker in the basement?"

"I wasn't going to be using it for a while, so I put it and some other things I wouldn't be needing in the footlocker and stored it down there, out of the way."

"How come you to have the gun in the first place?" Stan asked. "Somebody threaten you or something?"

"No. I used it as a target gun. I belong to a couple of gun clubs."

"When did this burglary take place?" Stan asked.

"About six weeks ago. You can ask them over at the police station."

"We will," Stan said.

"What am I supposed to have done with it? Hold up somebody, or kill somebody, or what?"

Neither Stan nor I said anything.

"Well?" Lambert said. "You asked me if I knew a man named Larry Yeager. Am I supposed to have held him up or shot him or—" He broke off abruptly and stood there with a stunned, incredulous look in his eyes. "Good Lord!" he said. "You said noon, didn't you? You asked me where I was at noon."

"That's right," Stan said. "And you told us you were right here."

"I was," Lambert said. "And I can prove it. I talked with someone on the phone at noon. I know it was noon because the twelve o'clock news had just come on."

"Who'd you talk to?" Stan asked.

"My boss," he said. "It's after closing time at the office, but I can give you my boss' phone number."

I took out my notebook. "His address too," I said.

"I wonder what ever happened to him?" Stan said sourly.

I glanced at him. "Who?"

"Santa Claus," he said.

BY THE TIME Stan and I had checked out Earl Lambert's alibi, confirmed his account of the burglary with the local precinct detectives, and driven down to the Palace Hotel on the Bowery, it was half-past midnight.

Like many skid-row hotels, the Palace was on the second floor, with a small desk at the top of a steep stairway that began the moment you stepped off the sidewalk. Fred Beaumont, the desk clerk told us, was in room 203.

The man who opened the door to my knock was nearing seventy, a small, fragile-looking man with fine white hair like spun cotton, an almost saintly face, and gentle brown eyes that seemed close to tears.

"Sit down, gentlemen," he said, gesturing toward the bed. "I'm sorry my accomodations are so limited."

Stan and I sat down on the bed and waited while Beaumont shuffled across the floor to the room's single chair.

"Some night, I knew, there would be a knock on the door,

and it would be the police," Beaumont said. "But then, all parolees are rather prone to visits from the police, aren't they?"

"Not if they keep their nose clean," Stan said.

"Oh, that I have done," Beaumont said. "Yes, indeed."

"You don't consider selling that stag film to Dixie Ryan a violation of parole?" Stan asked.

Beaumont sighed softly. "Oh," he said. "That."

"Yes, that," Stan said. "That could put you right back where you came from."

"You don't understand," Beaumont said. "I was in such desperate need of money that I—" He paused. "Are you going to send me back?"

"That depends," Stan said. "A little cooperation goes a long way in this town, Mr. Beaumont."

"Ah, yes," Beaumont said. "And I do want to cooperate, sir. I most assuredly do."

"We understand you made that film ten years ago, just before you went to prison," Stan said. "Why?"

"For my own amusement. I simply installed a two-way mirror over the fireplace in one of the bedrooms, and then set up a 16 mm movie camera in the adjoining room. Then, whenever some of my guests

would wander into the bedroom, and nature took its course, I would record the proceedings."

"Without their knowledge, of course?"

"Of course."

"How many people were in the film altogether?" Stan asked him.

Beaumont's forehead furrowed. "Six, I believe," he said. "Yes, six. Three men and three women."

"You make it all in one night?"

"Yes. And now I recall that there was someone else in it. Another girl. And a very beautiful young girl, too. I don't know why I didn't recall her at once." He paused reflectively. "She did a very provocative little dance for me. Yes, very provocative. She was about fifteen, I would say, and hair as yellow as butter."

I got out my notebook. "We'd better get some names down," I said. "Let's start with your dancing girl."

"She never told me her name, sir. Not her real name, anyway. When I asked her what it was, she said to just call her Honey. It was the first time I'd ever seen her—and, as it happened, the last." He paused. "She provided me with one of the most incredible experiences of my life."

"What happened?" Stan asked.

"It was after she'd done her little dance," Beaumont said. "I—was—ah—understandably aroused. But when I tried to approach her, she kept backing away and laughing at me. Finally, when I'd cornered her, she broke off laughing long enough to announce that she was a virgin."

"She was what?" Stan said.

"Exactly," Beaumont said.

"At first I thought she was merely trying to add a little spice to the moment, and I joined in the laughter." He shook his head slowly. "But the remarkable thing about it, gentlemen, was that she *was* a virgin. When I scoffed at the very possibility, she invited me to verify the fact for myself."

"And?" Stan said.

"I did," Beaumont said. "And she was."

"I'll be damned," Stan said.

"I was speechless," Beaumont said. "She kept laughing at me all the time she was putting her clothes back on. She left as soon as she was dressed, and she was still laughing as she went out the door."

"How'd she happen to show up at your place to begin with?" Stan asked.

Beaumont looked at him with infinite patience. "My dear boy, that was ten long years ago."

Surely you can't expect me to recall a detail like that?"

"And the other people in the film?" Stan said.

"All of them were regulars, one might say."

"Let's get the names down," I said. "Start with the men."

"Ghosts," Beaumont said. "That's what they seem like to me now. Ghosts."

I waited.

"Well," Beaumont said, "there was Eddie Willard. Then there was—"

"Hold on," I said. "We're going to talk to every one of these people, Beaumont, and we're going to need more than just their names to find them. As you said, all this was ten long years ago."

"I understand," Beaumont said. "And I want to help, believe me. But I knew almost nothing about their personal lives, even then."

"Do the best you can," I said. "Besides his name, what can you tell us about this Eddie Willard?"

"He was a student somewhere. I think Columbia."

I nodded. "We can check the records there."

"And then there was Bill Marcy. His father was head of the Marcy Electronics Company." He paused. "And Dave Anders. Dave was studying to be an accountant."



"Can't you recall anything else about him?"

"I wish I could," Beaumont said.

"All right, then. How about the women?"

"The one I recall most vividly is Leda Ellis. She was a lively one, Leda was. She used to tell the most hilarious jokes about her husband, Webster. What made them all the more droll was that she usually told them in the altogether. Her husband was the Webster part of Webster, Macklin & Hughes, the law firm." He paused. "And then there was Marian Coe. She worked for the telephone company. And Genita Garren. She taught some kind of arts and crafts course, over in the Village somewhere."



"Very good," Stan said flatly.

Beaumont sat staring at the floor, his face set in the half-smiling, reflective expression old men get when they think about the long ago.

"It's so strange about the past," he said softly. "None of it really ever dies, does it?"

"At least not in the detective business," Stan said.

I got to my feet. "Ready, Stan?"

Beaumont sighed to himself, his eyes bleak. "Where are the snows of yesteryear?" he said, his voice suddenly tired and weak. "I wonder, gentlemen—what ever could have happened to them?"

"What the hell?" Stan said. "You feel okay, Mr. Beaumont?"

"I feel old, son," Beaumont said. "I feel like the oldest man on the face of the earth."

## VI

WHEN STAN and I got back to the station house, I paused at the teletype machine in the muster room long enough to read back through the alarms that had come in since noon, hoping that there might be something I could connect in some way with our homicide, but there was nothing.

"Anything on the chatter-box?" Stan asked as we started

up the stairs to the squad room on the second floor.

"No," I said. "It seems to have been a fairly quiet day."

"And meanwhile Larry Yeager's girl friend is sitting over there in the slammer. Man, that Doris Hagen was one mad girl when I sent her over there, Pete."

"I can believe it," I said. "She was working up a pretty good mad, even before she knew where she was going."

I opened the gate in the counter that runs across the forepart of the squad room, held it for Stan, and followed him into the squad room proper.

Except for Barney Fells, the room was empty, which, considering the time of evening, was very unusual. The squad commander was standing by the water cooler, a paper cup in one hand and the stub of a cigar in the other, scowling at us—a tough, wiry, graying man with quick, sharp eyes. A cop's cop, all the way.

I draped my jacket over the back of my chair, sat down, and gave him a fast recap of the things Stan and I had done so far.

When I finished, he shook his head slowly. "That Larry Yeager must have been one sweet character," he said. "And so you figure he recognized

somebody in that stag film and decided to add a little black-mail to his other accomplishments, eh?"

"There doesn't seem to be any other answer," Stan said.

"It'd be pretty hard to come up with one, at that," Barney said. "Pete, I took a call for you a while ago, from Ruby Wyman, over at the lab. About that piece of sunglass lens you boys found over at Yeager's apartment. He says there was enough of it for him to work out the prescription the lens was ground from."

"Good," I said. "Ruby's one of the best."

"That he is. And another thing he did was to analyze the glass as glass. It seems there's all kinds of optical glass, and this particular kind is fairly brittle, so it's not so widely used as some of the others. Ruby says that narrows down the number of places that could have ground it."

"It was a particular shade of green, too," Stan said. "Considering that we have the exact prescription, plus the exact kind of glass, plus the exact shade, that idea of Pete's about putting all the optical houses on the watch-and-wait just might pay off."

"It all depends on how smart the killer is," Barney said. "If he's real smart, he'd never have

that lens replaced at all. In any case, Ruby's data have already been mimeoed and distributed to every optical house in the area."

"We might even go a step farther," I said. "Seeing that Ruby's narrowed things down so well, why not ask the optical houses to check back through their records?"

"Hell, Pete," Barney said. "There'd be tens of thousands of prescriptions for them to go through. Millions, maybe."

"Not the way it's narrowed down now," I said. "And it just might turn the trick, Barney. If we could come up with the original prescription, we'd probably also come up with our killer."

"Why even argue about it?" Barney said. "What can we lose? I'll get Communications to put out a rider on that circular right away." He moved off in the direction of his cubbyhole office.

"Well, so much for the lens," Stan said. "What next, Pete?"

I got out my notebook, found the page listing the names of the people who had appeared in Fred Beaumont's stag film, and handed it to him.

"How about calling BCI and the Information Unit on these?" I said. "Meanwhile, I'll try to catch up on a little paperwork."

Stan got busy on the phone, and I settled down to the job of

typing separate reports on all the people I had talked to since our arrival at Larry Yeager's apartment.

"Mr. Selby?" a whiny voice said, so unexpectedly and so close to me that I whirled around in my chair, half angry at having been approached from behind in such a way.

The man who stood there, nervously toying with the brim of a brown straw hat, was somewhere in his middle forties, with iron-gray hair parted exactly in the middle, a sharp, narrow face, an almost lipless slit of a mouth, and a jutting, undershot jaw with a two-day growth of beard on it.

"Yes," I said, "I'm Selby. What can I do for you?"

"I was a friend of Larry Yeager's," he said. "My name's Grimes. Obie Grimes."

I nodded toward the straight chair at the end of my desk. "Sit down, Mr. Grimes."

He sat down carefully on the edge of the chair and put his hat in his lap. "When I saw in the paper what had happened to Larry, I knew I had to do something right away. I called Headquarters and asked them who was in charge of the case. They said you were." He sat fingering the hat nervously for a moment. "I'll put it straight out," he said. "I'm scared to death, Mr. Selby. I'm so scared

that I'm sick to my stomach."

"Why?"

"Because I know who killed Larry," he said, suddenly beginning to sweat. "But he made a mistake. When he—"

"Just a minute," I said. "When who made a mistake?"

"Roy Cogan," he said. "When he finds out he killed the wrong man—"

"What do you mean, wrong man?"

"I'm the one he meant to kill. Only he got it all wrong. When he finds out, he'll kill me."

"You mean Cogan shot Yeager, thinking it was you?"

"No. What I mean is, Cogan thought Yeager was the one that'd been messing around with his wife. But it wasn't Yeager. It was me. Larry never even knew Cogan's wife."

"One moment, Mr. Grimes," I said, noting that Stan was hanging up his phone. "Stan, this is Mr. Obie Grimes, Mr. Grimes, this is my partner, Detective Rayder."

The two men nodded to each other, and I said, "I wanted you to hear Mr. Grimes' story, Stan. He thinks he knows who killed Larry Yeager."

"I don't just think it," Grimes said in his whining voice. "I damn well know it."

"Suppose you tell us about it," I said.

"It's just like I already told

you," he said. "Roy Cogan thought Larry was fooling around with Vernice—with Mrs. Cogan. But Larry'd never even laid eyes on her."

"Then why did Cogan think that?" I asked.

"Because we'd been using Larry's apartment. Vernice and me. I couldn't take her to my place, on account of my landlady, and Vernice was afraid somebody'd see her if we went to a hotel."

"You take Mrs. Cogan there pretty often?"

"Yes, quite a bit. I'd call Larry to see if he was going to be out. If he was, he'd leave the door on the latch. Vernice didn't want to risk being seen on the street with anybody, so I'd meet her over there. But somebody must have seen her go in there. Somebody that knew her husband. Because the first thing Cogan did when he got out of jail was—"

"Hold it," Stan said. "What was he in for?"

Grimes shuddered. "Man-slaughter," he said. "He beat a man to death with his fists. He was in Dannemora, but I didn't know that, of course. Vernice told me he was down in South America, working for some oil company. The first I knew he wasn't was when he busted in on me over at Larry's apartment."



"Tell us about it," Stan said.

"Well, when Roy came back from Dannemora, and Vernice wasn't home, he went straight over to Larry's. Vernice said later she hadn't expected him home for another six weeks. Anyhow, Cogan knew all about her going over there all the time, and that's why he didn't let her know exactly when he was getting out. He wanted to catch her by surprise.

"And he almost did catch her, too. I was already there at Larry's, and Vernice was on her way over. In fact, she got there not more than five minutes after he left."

"What happened?" I asked.

"I was sitting there waiting for Vernice, when all at once the door flies open and there stands Roy Cogan. I don't know who he is then, of course; all I know is he's the meanest looking one man I ever saw in my life, and one of the biggest. And besides that he's got a gun in his hand.

"The first thing he says is, 'You son of a bitch!' and then he comes tearing over to me and grabs me by the shirt front and yanks me up out of the chair and says, 'Damn you, Yeager, I'm going to blow your damn head off. Where's Vernice?' I was so scared I couldn't even talk. I kept trying to tell him I wasn't Larry, but I just couldn't get the words out.

"And all the time I was trying to say something, he kept pushing that gun harder and harder into my belly and yelling for me to tell him where Vernice was. And then he yanks my arm up behind me and walks me all through the apartment in front of him, looking for Vernice." He shook his head. "You talk about scared? Boy, I was so scared I—"

"We'll concede the point," I said. "You were scared. Go on, Mr. Grimes."

"Well, so when he couldn't find Vernice, he grabbed me by the shirt front again, and stuck the gun in my belly again, and

stuck his face right up against mine and said if I didn't tell him where she was in five seconds, I was one dead son of a bitch." He paused. "That's when I got my voice back. I told him I was only using the apartment a couple of days while Larry was out of town. I said if he'd look at the stuff in my billfold, my driver's license and all, he'd see I wasn't Larry Yeager, I was Obie Grimes." The man hesitated, embarrassed.

"And did he do that?" Stan asked.

"Yes, he did. I didn't think he would, but he did. And then he shoved me halfway across the room and said he ought to have known Vernice wouldn't fool around with anybody as ugly as me anyhow."

"What'd Cogan do then, Mr. Grimes?" Stan asked.

"Well, mostly he just stood there and cussed about Vernice two-timing him while he was in Dannemora and all. And about how he was going to kill Yeager. Then all of a sudden he whirled around and tore out of the apartment, like he'd just thought of somewhere he had to be in a hell of a hurry."

"And you say Mrs. Cogan arrived shortly after that?" I said.

"Not more than five minutes after."

"How about Larry Yeager?" I asked. "What'd he have to say

when you told him what had happened?"

"I never told him."

"You didn't warn him about the danger he was in?"

"I figured he was old enough to take care of himself."

"What you really figured was that as long as Cogan was looking for Yeager, he wouldn't be looking for you," I said. "Isn't that about the size of it, Mr. Grimes?"

"Anybody else would've done the same," he said. "It's every man for himself in this world, and you know it."

"Where's Vernice Cogan live?"

"The Dorsey. It's an apartment house between 65th and 66th on Amsterdam, about halfway down the street on the east side."

I took a moment to write down the address, and then reached for my phone. "All right, Mr. Grimes," I said, dialing BCI. "Thanks very much for coming in."

He stood up, mumbled something to himself, jammed the straw hat on his head, and stalked out of the room.

When BCI came on the wire, I asked that they make a check on Roy Cogan and call me back as soon as possible.

"Now all we have to do is wait," I said as I hung up. "Stan, how'd you make out

with that list of people in the stag film? You get BCI and the Information Unit squared away on them?"

"I was just finishing up when Grimes came in," Stan said. "They said they'd do the best they could for us."

When BCI called back, it was to say that Roy Cogan, in addition to his jolt for manslaughter, had been picked up for questioning three times as a suspect in burglaries, and released each time for lack of evidence.

Perhaps, I reflected, the 22 Smith & Wesson burgled from the basement of Earl Lambert's apartment house hadn't changed hands so many times after all.

I told Stan what I had learned from BCI, and then stood up and got into my jacket. "I think I'll run uptown for a little talk with Vernice Cogan," I said. "It just might happen that I can get a line on where her husband is."

"You want some help?"

"She's just one woman, Stan."

"If the husband's there—"

"If he is, so much the better. I'll bring him back with me."

## VII

THE DORSEY was one of an unbroken, block-long row of scabrous-looking converted

brownstones behind an iron jungle of fire escapes and barred windows.

I got out of the Plymouth, went up the trash-strewn steps to the front door, and looked around for the bell button, but there wasn't any. I started to rap on the door, but decided I might jar loose the single glass panel that hadn't been replaced with cardboard, and knocked on the doorjamb instead.

Nothing happened. I knocked again, waited again, and had just raised my hand to knock a third time when the door began to creak open slowly, a few inches at a time, the way they do in the horror movies.

The woman glowering at me in the dimness of the hallway was about fifty, dressed in a grimy T-shirt, sleazy black pajama bottoms, and high-heeled shoes with red anklets. Her flushed, sharp-featured face looked hung-over and she smelled the same way.

"All right," she said in a tight, harsh voice. "What is it now?"

"Mrs. Roy Cogan live here?" I asked.

"No," she said, starting to close the door. "She moved."

I reached out and caught the door. "Police," I said.

"Oh, God," she said.

"There are worse things," I said.

"Name one," she said, moving back just far enough to let me step into the dank, malodorous hallway. "She ain't here, I tell you."

"I'll talk to the super, then."

"I'm the super. The super, and the handyman, and hell, you name it."

"When did Mrs. Cogan leave?"

"A week ago today."

"She leave a forwarding address?"

"She didn't even leave a goody-by."

"You acquainted with Mr. Cogan?"

"I'm not so sure there was one. I never seen any men around here at all. In fact, the only time I saw *her* was when I picked up the rent. She was a bum and a boozier, and I'm glad she's gone."

"This is very important," I said. "Anything you can do to help will be appreciated."

"What could I do? All she was to me was a face and a name."

"All right, then," I said as I turned to leave. "Thanks, just the same."

"For what?" she said, and slammed the door. The single remaining glass panel didn't jar loose after all.

When I got back to the squad room, Stan Rayder was hunched over his junkheap



typewriter, hammering the keys so rapidly it sounded like someone popping corn.

I didn't stop him at first.

After I'd asked Communications to put out a pickup for Roy and Vernice Cogan, I told Stan the result of my visit to the Dorsey, and then asked what BCI and the Information Unit had been able to find out about the various performers in the stag film Larry Yeager had bought from Dixie Ryan.

"They did a terrific job, considering," Stan said, reaching for his notes. "They couldn't do anything about that teenage blonde girl, the one that did the dance for Fred Beaumont, because the only name Beaumont knew her by was Honey. But they did fine with the other six, the ones Beaumont did know the names of. In fact, they eliminated three of them for us, right off the bat."

"Which ones?"

"Well, first there was Dave Anders, the young guy Beaumont said was studying to be an accountant. Anders is dead. A car wreck, six years ago."

"Who were the other two?"

"Marian Coe and Genita Garren. Miss Coe's the one who used to work for the telephone company. She's been in the violent ward at Bellevue for the last two years."

"And Genita Garren?"



"Poor girl—she married a cop."

"And that's supposed to eliminate her?"

"It was a French cop. She's living in Bordeaux."

"That leaves Eddie Willard, Bill Marcy, and Leda Ellis."

"And Honey."

"Yes, and Honey. Let's take them down the line. What's Eddie Willard doing these days?"

"Loansharking."

"Fine way for a Columbia student to end up."

"It just shows you the value of a college education. If he hadn't gone to Columbia, he'd probably be borrowing money instead of lending it."

"What about Bill Marcy?"

"Like they say in the papers—a millionaire sportsman. His father left him a mint."

"And Leda Ellis?"

"According to the Informa-

tion Unit, she's still as lively as she was when she used to go to Fred Beaumont's parties." He put his notes away. "And that's it, Pete." He paused. "Listen, Pete—you've got a lot of paperwork to catch up on, right?"

"Too much of it. Why?"

"Well, while you're doing it, why don't I start checking out Willard and Marcy and Leda Ellis?"

"All three of them?"

"Why not?"

"You afraid I'll snag you into helping with the paperwork, or what?"

"Well, there's that, too. But mainly I'm just tired of home-staying this damn squad room."

"I know the feeling," I said. "Good-by and good luck."

Stan had been right about my having a lot of paperwork; and since it had to be done, now was the time to do it. I lit a cigar, took the cover off my Number five Underwood, and dug in.

I worked steadily for the better part of two hours; then I went down to the corner diner, had a quick breakfast, and came back to the squad room to pick up where I had left off.

Ten minutes later, the phone rang. It was Ted Holly, over at Communications.

"Pete, I've got some good news for you," he said. "That

rider on the circular about the sunglasses paid off. The Emmert Optical Company says they ground a pair to that identical prescription, and with that same kind and shade of glass. Of course, we can't assume that this is the only prescription of its kind. But it sure ought to do for starters."

"It'll do fine," I said. "You know the owner's name yet?"

"It was on the doctor's prescription. The glasses were made for a Miss Helen Ramey, 212 Central Park West."

"Thanks, Ted."

"She a newcomer to the case?"

"I'm not so sure," I said. "She just might have been the biggest part of it, right from the beginning."

"You mean, without her, there might not have been any case to begin with?"

"Yes," I said, "that's exactly what I mean."

I'd done enough paper work.

Helen Ramey turned out to be a small, neat girl with worried brown eyes, short brown hair, a blunt nose, and a head almost as perfectly round as a bowling ball. She had, she told me, lost her sunglasses at Atlantic City on a recent weekend there with two other girls from her office. She had come back from the water to find that someone had kicked her towel,

and that her glasses had been lost in the sand or stolen. She had been very much distressed by the loss, since the glasses had cost her nearly forty dollars.

I was able to verify Miss Ramey's story with both of the other girls, both of whom also verified the fact that, at the time of the murder, Miss Ramey had been having lunch at her desk in the office where she worked.

All of which meant that our only real lead in the homicide had evaporated, and that the glasses could have been dropped at Larry Yeager's apartment by almost anyone at all.

After I'd driven back to the station house, I bought a quart container of black coffee and took it up to the squad room with me.

None of the messages on my call spike had anything to do with the investigation, and the single report in my *In* basket, signed by the Assistant Medical Examiner who had autopsied Yeager's body at Bellevue, boiled down to the fact that Yeager had died as a result of having been shot four times with a gun.

I'd just finished filing the report in Yeager's folder when Stan Rayder walked in. While he got his big white mug from his desk and helped himself to

some of my coffee, I told him the sad outcome of my check on Helen Ramey.

"She has an oddly shaped head," I said. "It's a little large, for a woman, and absolutely round. With a head like that, the frames of her sunglasses would have to be wider than most women's frames would be."

"I get it," he said. "In other words, they'd be wide enough to be worn by either a woman or a man." He shook his head. "A bum break. It means we're right back where we started. Our hottest suspect just went right out the window."

"That's just about the sorry size of it," I said. "And as long as we're losing leads and suspects the way we are, we might as well let go of one more."

"Who?"

"Yeager's girl friend. Doris Hagen. I just don't see her as a material witness, Stan. Not with the way things've worked out since we juggled her."

"I agree," he said. "And besides, if we change our minds about her later, we can always pick her up again."

I made arrangements for Doris Hagen to be released, and then got out my notebook. "How about a run-down on how you made out with the people in that stag film?" I asked.

"I didn't do so well," he said.

"Take Eddie Willard, for instance. The guy hasn't been home for over a week. Nobody's seen him around at all. And just about the same thing goes for Bill Marcy, God's gift to women and saloon keepers. He was at a bachelor party last night. Pretty well oiled, too, it seems. Along about two a.m. he said he was going out and scout up a woman. That's the last anybody's seen him. He hasn't been back to his apartment, and he didn't show up for a breakfast date with a friend of his. A wild man, the friend says."

"That leaves Mrs. Leda Ellis, the woman Beaumont said liked to make jokes about her husband while she walked around in the raw. She among the missing, too?"

"Yes," Stan said. "Her husband says she left him two weeks ago. He doesn't know why, and he doesn't know where she is. The last time she took off that way, he says, she wound up in Acapulco with a bullfighter."

The phone rang.

"My turn," Stan said, reaching for the extension. "Detective Rayder, Sixth Squad. . . Yeah? . . . Hey, that's terrific! . . . Yes, I will. . . Yes, we'll be over there right away. . . You too, Bill. Thanks a lot." He put the phone down

and grinned at me. "Bill Chumley, over at Headquarters," he said. "You remember back in the dim dark past when you asked for some men to check on whether Larry Yeager had a lock-box somewhere?"

"They found one?"

"They sure did. At the McPherson Savings Bank, on 86th Street."

"Anything interesting in it?"

"Nobody knows. The bank says that until they see a court order, it's strictly hands off."

"Well, we can take care of that fast enough," I said as I reached for the phone. "First, I want to ask Communications to put out a pickup for those people in the stag film, and then we can call ahead for a court order and pick it up on our way uptown."

## VIII

AS IT happened, Larry Yeager's safe-deposit box did contain something interesting. It contained—along with a little over six hundred dollars in cash and a few personal papers—a can of 16 mm movie film.

By the time Stan and I had touched all the legal bases necessary to impound the film, rounded up a 16 mm projector, and had the film ready to roll in a small utility room at

Headquarters, it was a quarter past one p.m.

The wall of the room was a little too dark to make a good screen, but it would have to do. Stan switched off the overhead light, and I pressed the button that started the projector.

Considering that the film had been made under very poor lighting conditions, with the camera in a fixed position behind a two-way mirror, the quality of the photography was surprisingly good.

"What I like about stag films," Stan said as we watched the first couple on the bed, "is that you never have to make a guess about what the actors are up to."

There was nothing at all on the film for a moment or so; then we were suddenly in the bedroom again, watching one young woman help another to undress. Then the film flickered off and immediately flickered on again to show both girls in the nude, sitting on the side of the bed.

"Looks like Fred Beaumont did a little editing," Stan said as we watched the scene progress. "Every time there was a lull in the action, he cut it out."

The scene with the two young women lasted several minutes. When it was over, the film went to black, then brightened again to show one of the

same girls, this time with a man.

"Quick switch," Stan commented. "I wonder what she does for a change of pace?"

The film continued until we had seen, in various combinations, three different women and three different men. Then, abruptly, we were watching a very young and very beautiful blonde girl in the process of raising her skirt above her knees.

"That must be the teenage kid Beaumont told us about," Stan said as the hem of the girl's dress moved slowly up her legs to reveal taut round garters rolled high on her thighs. "The one who told him just to call her Honey."

The girl was smiling directly into the camera, her face as serene and innocent as a child's. It was an expression calculated to enhance the effect of what she was doing with her skirt, and it succeeded wonderfully.

The skirt crept past the flare of her hips, paused a moment, and then started upward again, to pause once more midway up the lower slopes of the jutting breasts. Then the breasts themselves were bared, and the girl held the hem of the skirt pressed beneath her chin, her head a little to one side and her eyes half closed, in a provocative

blend of coquetry and shyness. She stood that way for fully half a minute; then, slowly at first, then faster, she began to undulate her hips, while at the same time she moved her small flat belly in short quick thrusts in the direction of the camera.

I'd noticed nothing familiar about her face when it had first flashed on the wall, but now I began to have the uneasy feeling that I'd seen it before.

Then, the next time she turned full face to the camera, and I had a long look at the tilted, almost Oriental eyes, I realized who she was.

"June Courtney," I said aloud as the film ended and the empty reel whirled noisily in the projector.

"What?" Stan said, switching on the overhead light.

"Honey," I said. "Her real name's June Courtney. It was that long blonde hair that threw me. She's a brunette now, with short hair and bangs."

"I know I've heard that name before," Stan said. "But I can't remember where."

"I told you about her when I called you from Reba Daniels' apartment," I said. "She's the one who's producing the stage show Larry Yeager was going to have a part in."

"Oh, sure," Stan said. "I remember now. She's the one

that said Yeager's getting murdered was the best thing that could have happened."

"Yes," I said, "and with a big, loud second from Warren Eads, the guy that wrote the show."

"Didn't you say June and Eads had real big eyes for each other?"

"Real big."

"Well, well," Stan said. "And she's a girl with an outsize bank account, too, as I remember."

"Probably so. In any case, her father has one." I switched the reels on the projector and started the motor to rewind the film. "Neither June nor Eads made any bones about how much they hated Yeager, and they both said he was lousing up the show. But when I asked them why they'd hired him in the first place, and why they'd given him a run-of-the-show contract, they didn't have a whole lot to say."

Stan grinned. "Sounds almost as if Yeager might've had some kind of club over their heads, doesn't it?" he said. "A little round club like—well, say like a can of movie film, for example." His grin widened. "And with a club like that, why stop with blackmailing yourself into a stage show? Why not cut yourself in for a little cash money to go along with it?"

I turned off the projector,

took out the reel of film, and replaced it in its can. "I think it's time somebody paid another call on June Courtney," I said.

"And on Warren Eads, too," Stan said. "After all, Yeager wasn't only blackmailing his girl, he was ruining his play."

## IX

JUNE COURTNEY lived at "824 Fifth Avenue," one of those stately, elderly apartment houses whose street addresses are also their names.

She opened the door for us herself. Which surprised me. I'd expected a butler, or at least a maid.

"Well, goodness me," she said, her tilted brown eyes smiling at me from beneath the dark, ragged bangs. "If it isn't Detective Selby. And he's brought a friend! How nice."

She was wearing a sleeveless jersey blouse and taut, candy-striped stretch pants, and from the slightly disheveled hair and the bruised-looking lips, I had a strong feeling she had not been spending the last few minutes alone.

"This is my precinct partner, Mr. Rayder," I said.

"Oh, really? That is nice. Please come in."

We followed her down the long entrance hall and turned left into a large living room,

one entire wall of which was a paneled glass window overlooking Central Park.

Warren Eads was sitting in the middle of a long, low couch in front of the window, a glass in one hand and a cigarette in the other, his pink moon face sheened with sweat and one red-fuzz eyebrow arched quizzically.

"You remember Mr. Selby, baby," June Courtney said to him. "This other gentleman is his partner, Mr. Rayder."

"Hello," Stan said.

Eads swirled the ice cubes around in his drink and said nothing.

Miss Courtney sat down beside Eads and motioned Stan and me to chairs. "It's so nice of you to call," she said with mock graciousness. "Incidentally, why have you?"

"Mr. Rayder and I have just seen a rather unusual movie, Miss Courtney," I said. "It was one made about ten years ago."

"Now that is interesting," she said, turning toward Eads. "Warren, baby, Mr. Selby and Mr. Rayder have just seen a movie made ten years ago!"

"Incredible," Eads said.

"So was the fact that Miss Courtney was the star performer, so to speak," Stan said.

June shrugged prettily. "I really have no idea what you're talking about," she said.



"We thought the film might have had something to do with your giving Larry Yeager an important part in your show," I said.

"Oh, really, now," she said. "After all, I—"

"After all," a man's voice boomed from the doorway to the left, "how much longer are we going to be such cowards?"

"Father!" June exclaimed, rising quickly and half running toward him. "You know what Doctor said. You're not supposed to get out of bed for anything."

"To hell with what Doctor said," the man said, looking coolly at Stan and me. "I've been listening to this conversation ever since it began."

HE WAS about sixty, but built like a fire hydrant, a totally bald man with a lot of gold teeth and a jaw like a clenched fist. With his bull neck and blocky shoulders, and wearing a blue silk bathrobe, he might have been an aging wrestler coming into a ring.

June reached up to take his arm, but he brushed her hand away and strode over to stand directly in front of Stan and me.

"Who's the head man on this case?" he demanded, looking at me. "You?"

I nodded. "My name's Selby,"

I said. "This is Detective Rayder."

Courtney walked to the couch and sat down heavily beside Warren Eads. June sat down on the other side of her father.

"I was never sick a day in my life before," Courtney rumbled, giving the belt of his bathrobe a savage jerk to tighten it about his hard-looking waist. "And when keeping something to himself can make a man sick, it's time to stop. June, we're going to bring this whole thing out in the open, right here and now."

"But, Father—!" June began.

"Quiet," Courtney said sharply. "We've all been fools. It's time we stopped." He looked at me from beneath shaggy eyebrows and nodded slowly. "You were right, Selby. The reason June and Warren gave Larry Yeager a part in the show was that they had to. They had to because that sniveling idiot of a Yeager had got hold of that film."

"Father—" June began again.

"Shut up, June," Courtney said. "The first I knew about it, Selby, was when June told me she'd hired him. I knew there had to be some reason for such an unlikely thing to do, and I kept hammering away at her until she told me what it was." He paused, shaking his head incredulously. "That idiot. He actually thought that a part in

the show would make him a star."

"Is that all he wanted?" I asked. "Just the part? He didn't ask for money as well?"

"He hadn't quite got around to that yet," Courtney said.

"He paid a thousand dollars for that film," I said. "I'm wondering where he got it."

"Not from us," Courtney said.

"By the way, Mr. Courtney," Stan said. "Where were you yesterday, between half-past eleven and half-past twelve?"

"In bed," Courtney said promptly. "Where, according to my doctor, I ought to be at this minute."

June leaned forward a little, her slanted eyes slightly narrowed. "Is that when Larry was killed, Mr. Rayder?" she asked. "Between eleven-thirty and twelve-thirty?"

"Yes."

"Father!" June exclaimed triumphantly. "Warren! Isn't that wonderful?"

"What's so wonderful about it?" Stan asked.

"We were here," June said. "We were all right here, right in this apartment. Father and Warren and I. And Jill and Tony Edwards were here too." She turned her smile from Stan to me. "So you see, none of us could have had anything to do with it."

"Congratulations," Stan said.

"Who are Jill and Tony Edwards?"

"They're doing the choreography for our show. They'd dropped by to talk about the girls' costumes."

"Where do they live?" I asked.

"The Colmar Arms, on West End Avenue."

"A charming couple," Warren Eads said. "You'll enjoy talking to them."

"And do give them our best," June said, glancing pointedly at the door. "You'll be able to find your way out, I'm sure."

"Too bad you're in such a rush," Eads said.

"Warren, baby, I think little June could use a drink," June said. "And Father, you'd better go back to bed."

"Bed be damned," Courtney said in his rumbling voice. "You think you're the only one around here old enough to take a drink? Fix me one, too, Warren—and this time, damn it, put a little whiskey in it."

June Courtney's story proved to be as easy to verify as it had been hard to hear. Less than an hour after we'd heard it, we had corroborated her story with Jill and Tony Edwards at the Colmar Arms and were on our way back to the precinct.

We reached the squad room just as Barney Fells started out the door.

"Well, you boys have one less

suspect than you thought you had," Barney said. "Roy Cogan."

"How come?" Stan asked.

"A patrolman up in the 20th Precinct caught him with the meat in his mouth. Burglary."

"What about the time of the homicide?" I asked. "Where was he then?"

"Just exactly where he ought to have been—at the parole office, reporting in per schedule, right on the button," He grinned crookedly. "Try breaking *that* alibi."

Stan looked at me and shrugged resignedly. "Another *ex-suspect*," he said. "We're getting quite a collection of them."

"Pete, there was a phone call for you," Barney said. "Mrs. Robert Farrell."

"Fine," I said. "But who's Mrs. Robert Farrell?"

"You didn't know? She's the lady that owns the house where Larry Yeager had his apartment."

"I thought she was in Europe."

"She just got back. She wanted to know what that police seal was doing on the door of Yeager's apartment. She seemed pretty p.o'd about it, for some reason. I left her number on your call spike." He started down the stairs to the muster room.

"I think I'll shave," Stan said, heading in the direction of the

washroom. "Maybe it'll wake me up a little."

I walked over to my desk, glanced at the number Barney had left on the call spike, and dialed it.

"Yes?" It was a crisp, impatient, imperious voice, full of years and vinegar.

"This is Detective Selby, Sixth Pre—" I began.

"Well!" she snapped. "You certainly took your time about calling me, didn't you?"

"Sorry," I said. "I just got back to the squad room."

"Well, you're too late," she said. "I've a right to inspect my own property, and that's exactly what I'm doing."

"You mean you took the police seal off Mr. Yeager's door?" I said. "You ought to know better than that, Mrs. Farrell. A police seal is—"

"I can tell you what *this* one is," she said. "This one is lying in shreds on Mr. Yeager's coffee table."

"Surely you know it's police practice to—"

"The devil with police practice," she said, and hung up.

I peeled the wrapper from a cigar, struck a match—and then sat motionless while the flame burned slowly up to my fingers and the significance of what had just happened gradually penetrated my overtired mind.

Then I dropped the match in the ashtray, stuck the unlighted cigar back in my pocket, and reached for the Manhattan telephone book.

The number listed for Mrs. Farrell was the same number I'd just dialed, which meant the number she'd left with Barney Fells had been the number of the phone in her own apartment on the first floor.

And yet, when I'd called her just now, she hadn't answered the phone in her own apartment; she'd answered the one in Larry Yeager's.

The answer would seem to be that the phone in Yeager's apartment was merely an extension, and that when someone called, the phones in both apartments rang at the same time.

And if that was the case, Larry Yeager would have no listing in the directory.

I looked under the Yeagers. There were fewer than I would have guessed, only a dozen or so, and Larry Yeager was not among them.

I picked up the phone and dialed Mrs. Farrell again.

"Yes?" the imperious voice said.

"Detective Selby," I said. "It's important that I know whether or not Mr. Yeager's phone is an extension on the one in your own apartment."

"I'm sure I can't even begin



to imagine why that should be impor—"

"This is serious police business, Mrs. Farrell. Answer the question, please. Is it an extension, or isn't it?"

"Yes, it is," she said, practically spitting the words, and slammed the receiver in my ear.

A few minutes later, Stan Rayder walked in. "Man, I'll have to say one thing for you, Pete," he said as he sat down at his desk. "You're one guy that can really look thoughtful. What're you brooding about? Your misspent youth?"

"Not this time," I said. "This time, it's Larry Yeager's ex-wife. Reba Daniels."

"Why? Because she's such a dish?"

"Not exactly," I said.

"Why, then? Hell, Pete, that woman walked out of Yeager's life years ago."

"I know," I said. "But that doesn't mean she couldn't have walked back in again."

Stan looked at me for a long moment. "And walked back in with a gun in her hand, you mean?"

"That could be, Stan," I said. "That just could be."

## X

SIX HOURS of hard, fast work later, Stan and I sat on the

white-leather sofa in Reba Daniels' living room, listening to the sound of high heels coming along the corridor outside. The carpeting out there had been rolled up for waxing, and the ping of the heels was sharp, almost metallic.

The heels paused at the door and a key grated in the lock. Mrs. Daniels opened the door, saw Stan and me, and stopped stock-still in the doorway.

"Come in, Mrs. Daniels," Stan said quietly.

The gray-green eyes beneath their long, sooty lashes seemed to grow a little darker and the overhead light in the corridor behind her caught the golden highlights in her shoulder-length auburn hair. She was wearing an expensively simple powder-blue dress that clung to her body tightly enough to mold the dimple in her naval and limn the edges of her lingerie.

"I'm not going to ask you what you're doing here," she said, closing the door behind her. "I'm simply going to ask you to leave."

"We'll be leaving in good time, Mrs. Daniels," I said. "Meanwhile, perhaps you'd better sit down."

She hesitated, then walked to one of the chairs across from us and sat down.

"Just to satisfy my curiosity," she said, "would you mind tell-

ing me how you got in here?"

"By pushing the blade of my knife against the bevel of the bolt on your door," I said.

"And the reason you wanted in here in the first place?"

"Because it was the one place where, sooner or later, you were sure to come," I said. "And maybe you'd satisfy our curiosity too, Mrs. Daniels. When I was here yesterday, I wanted to call Larry Yeager's apartment. But I couldn't find your phone book. You were in the bedroom, changing your clothes for your trip to Bellevue, and I called to you through the door to ask you where it was. You said you'd taken it into the bedroom earlier, and that you'd look up Yeager's number for me. A few moments later, you called it out to me. Do you remember?"

"Yes."

"Well, what puzzles us is how you could have looked it up. You see, it isn't listed in the book." I paused. "You just pretended to look it up, Mrs. Daniels."

She didn't say anything. The green eyes weren't merely dark now; they were almost black.

"You'd just finished telling me you hadn't talked to Yeager in ten or twelve years," I said. "If you hadn't talked to him in all that time, you wouldn't have known his phone number.

But you did know his number, because you *had* talked to him."

"That's true," she said evenly. "I did know Larry's number. I met him on the street one day, and he talked me into having a drink with him at a bar. He kept telling me I ought to call him sometime. He repeated his phone number again and again, and kept telling me to remember it."

"What about the sunglasses you found on the beach at Atlantic City?" Stan asked.

"I can afford to buy my own sunglasses, I assure you."

"But these, you found," Stan said. "At least that's what Earl Lambert told us when we talked to him about two hours ago. You and Lambert spent a weekend at Atlantic City a couple of weeks back, Mrs. Daniels. You found those sunglasses in the sand, and you were so taken with the frames that you were going to have them altered to fit you and have the lenses replaced with plain glass."

"A fragment of one of those lenses was on the floor near Yeager's body. Our lab was able to reconstruct the prescription the lenses were ground by, and with that we were able to trace the glasses back to the girl who lost them."

Mrs. Daniels lowered her eyes and sighed softly. "This is all very embarrassing," she said. "But you can't very well blame me for not having wanted to become involved in a murder investigation, can you?"

"Then you did drop those glasses at Yeager's apartment?"

"Yes. I called Larry one day, just as he'd asked me to. He talked me into going over to his apartment. I had the glasses in my bag. While I was there, they fell out and broke on the floor."

"When?"

"Last Wednesday, I think it was. Yes. Last Wednesday."

"Uh-uh," Stan said. "You had the glasses with you, yes—but not in your bag. You were probably wearing them as a disguise. And that piece of lens wasn't there before Yeager was murdered. We have someone to swear to that, Mrs. Daniels."

"This is all absolutely ridiculous," she said. "I think you've lost your minds—both of you."

"There are other things," I said.

"What other things?"

"Your access to the murder gun, for instance," I said. "We got to wondering how you might have got hold of it, and so we paid a second visit to Earl Lambert. We found out you'd been an overnight guest

of his on quite a few occasions. On one of them he showed you his target gun. He kept it in a footlocker, and sometime later he stored the footlocker in the basement. But before he did, you had several opportunities to help yourself to the gun, and you did."

"I did no such thing!" she said, raising her voice for the first time. "You really must be mad. I suppose the next thing you'll tell me is that you found my fingerprints on it."

"What we did find was burned powder on one of your white knit driving gloves," I said.

"You—what?"

"We were here once before today," I said. "We took all your gloves to the lab for analyses. Your right glove contains powder of exactly the same kind Earl Lambert used to load the cartridges for his target gun. He's a gun buff, and gun buffs like to prepare their own special mixtures. Under the spectroscope—"

"Stop it," she said, her voice suddenly very small and very frightened. "Please. Please stop."

"You'd told me you owned a sports car," I said. "An Austin-Healey. So I talked with the traffic officer nearest the spot where we found the gun, which was under a car parked



at the curb half a block from Yeager's apartment house."

"And the officer not only had seen the Austin-Healey," Stan said, "but he'd blown his whistle at the driver. At you, Mrs. Daniels, because you were going too fast. But what really marked you on his memory was a sound that made him think you'd sideswiped another car. What he actually did hear, we know now, was the sound of the gun bouncing up against the parked car when you threw it away."

"Please," she said. "Please don't. . . say any more."

It was very still in the room and the seconds went by slowly. Somewhere in another apartment someone began to strum a guitar, and from the street below there was a soft whisper of tires on asphalt.

A full minute passed, and still Reba Daniels sat completely motionless, her eyes fixed unseeingly on the small hands folded in her lap.

"Do you want to tell us about it, Mrs. Daniels?" I asked.

She gave no indication that she had heard me.

"Mrs. Daniels?"

She started, looked at me blankly for a moment, and then very slowly got to her feet and walked toward the glass cabinet that contained the loving cups and plaques and silver

platters she had won in sports car events.

I watched her closely.

When she started to open the glass doors, I stood up and walked over to stand beside her.

"Did you think I had a gun hidden in here?" she asked, running a fingertip gently along the handle of a loving cup.

"Such things have been known to happen," I said.

She shook her head, gave the cup a final caress, and closed the cabinet. "I'm afraid I've had my last experience with guns, Mr. Selby," she said. "I'll never be able to win any more prizes, will I? Or wear dresses like this again."

Neither Stan nor I said anything.

"What I hate most about this is that it means leaving so much behind," she said. "I had everything I ever wanted. And now. . . now I've got to leave it. It just doesn't seem possible this is happening to me."

"We have all the answers we need except one," I said.

She smiled a quick, wan smile that was gone so abruptly that I wondered whether it had ever really been there.

"You mean, why did I kill him?"

I nodded.

"He was extorting money

from me," she said. "He'd been doing it for years."

"In what way, Mrs. Daniels?"

"By threatening to tell that we'd never been divorced," she said. "Larry and I were married just before the Korean War broke out. About a year after he was recalled to service, I received a telegram from the Secretary of War, saying that he was missing in action. That was the last I ever heard from or about him until long after the war was over. In the meantime I had met Arnold Daniels."

"You tell Daniels about Larry?" Stan asked.

"No. Arnold Daniels was nothing but a drunken hulk, and I loathed him. But he was also the wealthiest man I'd ever met."

"And so you married him without bothering to divorce Larry Yeager?" Stan asked.

"Yes. I was sure Larry was dead. And I knew that a chance to marry so much money might never come my way again.

"And then?" Stan said.

"Then, after I'd been married to Arnold for a suitable time, I went to Florida and got a divorce."

"And considerable alimony?" Stan said.

"It was two thousand dollars a month," she said. "And then, about four years ago, Larry

suddenly appeared at my apartment. He said he'd been in a prison camp until the war was over, and that while he was there he'd realized our marriage was a mistake. When he got back to the States, he stayed on the West Coast."

"And he'd done nothing about a divorce, either?" I asked.

"No. And then one day a mutual friend happened to run into Larry out there and told him about my having married Arnold Daniels. Larry took the next plane to New York."

"And that's when the blackmail began?"

She nodded. "That very day. Larry had found out exactly how much alimony I was getting. He said that if I didn't start giving him five hundred dollars a month, he'd expose me. Going to prison as a bigamist and losing two thousand a month from Arnold was more than I could face, and so I began to pay him what he asked."

"—And this went on for four years?"

"Yes. Once I talked to a lawyer about that telegram from the Secretary of War saying that Larry was missing in action. I thought it might be possible to make my second marriage legal. But the lawyer said no. It seems that a telegram saying Larry had been

killed would have been the equivalent of a death certificate. But one that merely said 'missing in action' didn't mean a thing."

"I see," I said. "But why should you continue to pay him for four years, and then suddenly decide to kill him?"

"He wanted a bigger share of my alimony. He said I would have to start giving him half of it every month. And then one night Earl Lambert showed me that gun, and I knew just what I was going to do. When I left Earl's place the next morning, I had the gun in my bag."

"Still," I said, "you took that gun several weeks ago. Why so long a wait?"

"I just couldn't summon up the courage," she said. "But about three weeks ago Larry told me he had to have a thousand dollars in cash, and had to have it at once. I asked him why, but he just laughed and made some inane remark about wanting to buy a dirty movie. I gave him the

money—but when I did, I promised myself it would be the last penny he ever got."

"And was it?"

"Yes," she said. "Yesterday I was supposed to take him a thousand dollars—half of my alimony. Instead, I took that gun and killed him."

There was a long silence. Then Stan and I glanced at each other, got to our feet, and walked to the door.

"Ready, Mrs. Daniels?" I asked.

She rose, picked up her handbag, and walked toward us very slowly.

"It's happening, isn't it?" she said in a hushed, awed voice. "It's really happening."

But her eyes weren't on either Stan or me; they were on the closed door. And the look was there—the look you see only on the face of someone who stares into the kind of future that was waiting for Reba Daniels.

"Yes, Mrs. Daniels," I said. "It's really happening."

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## A GREAT SENSE OF HUMOR

by JONATHAN CRAIG

A Dramatic New Short Story Coming Soon

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*There was no noise. . . no blood. All had gone off exactly as planned. There was nothing between him and safety—nothing but a dead girl's shadow.*



# NICE AND DEAD

by LAWRENCE TREAT

HE SPOTTED her sitting alone at the far side of the big hotel dining room. Although the place was far too expensive for him to afford, his car had broken down and he was there for the night. Watching her, he decided to stay on.

She was a soft, cottony blond with buttery skin and a yearning heart, and he characterized her with sound and unerring judgment—rich, single and ready to be plucked. By him. As to why they'd let her run around loose, he couldn't understand, until she said she'd been a widow for only six months. Her husband, it turned out, had been killed in an airplane accident and she was recuperating from the shock.

She told him that much about herself after he'd made contact on the hotel veranda and they'd exchanged names. Grace Worthington. Alec Condon. A lovely evening. The air's so soft and balmy. Let's stroll down to the lake, shall we?

There, they stood on the dock and watched a golden moon loom up over the hills. She chatted in a high, adolescent treble and she kept clasping and unclasping her filigree bracelet. He wondered how much it had cost.

"What do you do?" she asked him.

"I paint."

"Oh! A real artist!"

He smiled down at her. Maybe women didn't love all artists, but they usually fell for him. For a while. And long enough to finance him until he met the next one. Only this time, there would be no next, for Grace was obviously too rich to let go. Besides, he found her pleasant enough, with the naiveté of a child.

"You're quite lovely," he said, applying a technique that was tried and true. For, when a tall, handsome artist flatters a woman and does it with a combination of humility and dash, how can she resist?

"You're quite lovely," Condon said, "and I'd like to paint your portrait. Would you mind?"

Her pale blue eyes danced with excitement.

"I'd love it," Grace said. "It would be nice." And, still nervous and still fingering the bracelet, she let it slide out of her grasp and drop into the water.

"Oh, my!" she said, embarrassed. "How stupid of me!"

"I'll get it for you," he said, and he took off his shoes and prepared to make the gesture gallant and chivalrous.

"Would you really? That would be nice."

Nice!

In the subsequent three years, he figured Grace had spoken the word upwards of fifty thousand times. She uttered it in a childish tone which, at the beginning, seemed to ache for his approval. Later on, however, he regarded it as a whine, a steady, unending, namby-pamby yack that went on tirelessly, with the dreary monotony of a leaky faucet.

They were married three months after they met, and they went to Europe on their honeymoon. She left her bag containing her passport on the plane, which continued on to Rome. The passport had to be flown back, and didn't arrive until the next day.

"We can stay at the airport hotel," Alec Condon said.

She accepted the suggestion as if he'd decided where to have lunch.

"That would be nice," she said.

The passport arrived in due course, and they went on to the hotel where they had reservations. There, she discovered she'd forgotten her vanity case.

"I must have left it at that other place," she said.

"I'll phone and see if it's there."

"That would be nice," she said.

For the rest of the trip he took charge of her passport and he even managed to overcome his annoyance at the trail of losses at hotels, restaurants, buses and stations. After all, when she lost something she merely went out and replaced it. He was realist enough to see the stupidity of killing the goose that laid the golden egg, although, naturally enough, the idea occurred to him. Even, it beckoned.

Still, he was reasonably content that first year. She built him a studio behind their luxurious suburban house. It was an expensive studio, where he painted pleasant little landscapes in the intervals between doing portraits of her. Otherwise, he puttered. And the stu-

dio became his sanctuary which she visited only to sit for him or else by specific invitation.

By the second year, the financial card by which he was attached to her grew strained, and her compulsive carelessness became a daily torment for him. She had two cars stolen because she'd forgotten to take the key out of the ignition while she'd gone shopping. She regularly mislaid her reading glasses, her purse, her mink stoles.

Condon kept wishing that she'd die so that he could inherit, but he shrank from doing anything about it. He resented her, not angrily, not head-on, but with a slow, repressed, icy venom that gnawed at him like acid. He dreamt of killing her and woke up frustrated to find that the dream was fantasy. He had many schemes and many devices, but he refrained from murder for the sound reason that year after year she increased her wealth. The stocks she bought, went up; the ones that she sold, went down.

Time after time she'd remark, casually, "You know those five hundred shares I just bought? They went up ten points."

"Then sell them," he'd say.

"I just can't bear to. They're much too nice."

In the next month they went

up another dozen points, and she forced herself to sell them.

"I hate to," Grace said, "but I'm afraid, I must." And the following week they plummeted down to the price at which she'd bought.

Can you kill a woman like that?

Still, as Alec Condon told himself after he'd met Myra, money isn't everything, and he'd have been greedy not to be satisfied with Grace's fortune at its present level. In fact, Myra so assumed, the first time he brought her to his studio.

"I like it here," she said. She was quick, clever and direct, and she not only knew her own mind, but she knew Alec's as well.

"I like it, too," he said, "but it belongs to Grace."

"Then divorce her."

"What about the studio? It isn't even mine."

"Oh, we'd live in the big house. This is much too small."

"And Grace?"

Myra put her arms around him.

"Grace," she said, "is your problem. But really, darling, you can't have both of us."

"I have, now."

"I want a home and a husband and a family."

"What about money?"

At the word, Myra grew almost dreamy.



"Money!" she said.

Alec thought of his dreams, but he was a practical man and he knew it was time to carry them out.

"I'll marry you one year from now," he said decisively, "but I don't want you to go through the embarrassment of being hauled into court as a co-respondent. Leave the state, Myra. Stay away and don't even write me. Understand?"

"Why, Alec!" she said. "How clever of you!" And she kissed him. It crossed his mind that she understood far too well.

He was, however, no fool, and he did nothing precipitously. He studied murder methods in fiction and fact, and found out that the more complicated the scheme, the more likely to backfire. A blunt instrument, he learnt, is the best weapon, and it should be disposable. A wooden mallet, for instance, being burnable, is the perfect instrument. For, even though the autopsy may show splinters that can be identified as a certain kind of wood, if you have no weapon to compare the splinters with, what good the analysis?

The same approach went for an alibi. The complicated alibi is the easiest to break. But to claim that you were home reading or balancing your check

book—how can anyone prove otherwise? So—a wooden mallet, and the alibi that he'd been working in his studio. That much was definite.

Still, who had any reason to kill Grace, except a husband who wanted her money in order to marry another woman? Alec was vulnerable, unless he could hand the police a better suspect than himself.

He got his next idea from a newspaper, which reported a daring jewel robbery in which thieves had broken into a house a few blocks away, ransacked a safe and tied up the owner. Thus far, the account stated, the police had no clues.

Fine, Alec decided. Grace would be killed by a jewel thief who left no clues. There remained only the problem of persuading her to leave some jewelry in the house, and then finding the proper thief.

The first part was easy. Alec had seen Grace's diamond necklace, valued at fifty thousand dollars. She kept it in the vault and never wore it.

"I'm sure I'd lose it," she said. "And it's not only worth a lot of money, but it was my mother's. It's a real heirloom."

"Bring it out just once," he said. "Wear it for my birthday."

"That would be nice," she said.

Which gave him plenty of

time in which to find his thief.

He hung around a few of the shadier bars for the better part of a week and dropped hints that he had a proposition for somebody who knew how to dispose of top-quality diamonds. In due time he was told that one Two-Story Murphy, known as Toosh, might be interested. Consequently Alec sat down one evening at a corner table in the OK Bar, dawdled over a beer and waited.

THE MAN who presently sat down on the other side of the table had a long, narrow head, a long, high-bridged nose and hard, gimlet eyes. The eyes seemed to bore through Alec in the effort of judging him and making sure he was no cop, had no connection with cops, and was leary of them. Eventually Alec passed inspection.

"They tell me you want to talk to somebody about something," the man said.

"Maybe," Alec said. "You're Two-Story Murphy. Is that right?"

"They call me Toosh. What do you want?"

"Know how to cash in on some diamonds? Say a necklace, for instance?"

"Let's see it."

"I haven't got it, but I can tell you where you can get hold of it, and it's going to be the



easiest job you ever fell into in all your life."

"What's in it for me?"

"The necklace, which is insured for fifty thousand."

Toosh nodded. "You want to collect the insurance, and I get the ice. How do I know this is on the level?"

"What are you scared of?"

"You," Toosh said. "I don't like you."

"I don't like you, either, but this is business. Interested?"

"What do I do?"

"I give you an address. I give you the time and place and date. The door of this house will be open, or at least un-

latched, and you can walk in. That's all. I tell you where the necklace is, and you pick it up and leave."

"I'm not walking into no house. That's dangerous. I'm a second-story man. What if somebody sees me?"

"Look," Alec said. "You know what a *modus operandi* file is, don't you? The M.O. You're a second story worker, so if you walk in the front door, the police never even think of you. Never."

"What if somebody sees me?"

"Then you walk out. You claim you rang the bell and nobody answered, so you opened the door. No crime, is it?"

Toosh thought for a long time. He tapped his fingers on the edge of the table. He lit a cigarette and tamped it out. He stroked his cheek. He stared at Alec. Then Toosh finally spoke.

"What's the address, and when do I do it?"

"Seventeen Seventy-five West Lime. On September fourteenth. At exactly eight o'clock. Not a minute earlier and not a minute later. Is that clear?"

"I got a battery watch. Never fails."

"How old is the battery?"

"Two months."

"Okay. Just don't lose it."

"You trying to teach me about watches, or you got a job for me?"

"The timing's important. At exactly eight o'clock you walk into this house and take the first doorway to the left. There, you'll find the necklace on a coffee table in front of the couch. It's a marble-topped table. The street light gives you enough illumination to see it. Pick up the necklace and examine it, and if you think it's not worth the money, forget the whole business. But I guarantee that the necklace is worth fifty thousand, and maybe a lot more. So pick it up and go. All yours. I never see you again, and you never saw me in your life."

"Give me ten bucks now, just to show you're not kidding."

Condon took out his wallet and removed a ten-spot.

"Here," he said.

Toosh accepted the bill, got up and walked away.

Good, Alec told himself. All set. Grace called everything nice. Well, her murder would be nice, too.

For the next few months, preceding his birthday, he was a model husband. He attended Grace like a lovesick swain. When she lost her purse, he produced an extra one from his pocket.

"I 'had' it with me, just in case you lost yours," he said, handing it to her.

Grace took it gratefully.

"That's nice," she said.

"I like to make it easy for you," he said. "I know you mislay things, but it's because you're dreamy and your mind is on higher matters. I don't mind."

"That's nice," she said.

On September fourth he reminded her of her promise to wear the necklace on his birthday.

"I won't forget," she said.

Nevertheless he reminded her again the next day, and every day thereafter.

The following Tuesday he found a broken piano leg in a deserted lot on the next street. He hefted the thick, heavy piece of lumber. Teak, he decided. It was strong, and the narrower turning at the base gave him an excellent grip. Perfect, he told himself. Not only a good weapon, but it obviated the risk of his being identified as the man who'd bought a mallet of the kind and type matching the splinters extracted from the dead woman's skull.

He liked the phrase and, applying it to Grace and thinking of her as the dead woman, he pitied her and began almost to like her. Then he thought of Myra, and his determination

hardened. He wanted Myra and he wanted Grace's money, and he was going to have them both.

On the morning of his birthday Grace kissed him. He told her to get the necklace from the vault and he offered to go with her, but she refused.

"Don't worry," she said. "I'll have it."

She came home at noon and showed him the necklace.

"Better give it to me," he said. "I'm afraid you might lose it."

"Oh, no," she said. "Not this. Never."

In the afternoon he went for a ride. He was excited and he kept telling himself that everything would go according to schedule. The only element over which he had no control was Toosh's arrival. It Toosh failed, then Alec would have the somewhat risky job of disposing of the necklace. Otherwise, he was home free. He'd play the part of the distraught husband and he'd have nothing to tell the police except that he'd found his wife dead and the necklace gone. He'd state that he'd been in his studio all evening, which would be true. There would be no complications and no points on which he could be tripped up.

It was the servants' night off and they'd tell the police that

Mrs. Condon often forgot to close the front door. They'd say that Mr. and Mrs. Condon got along well and never quarreled. Friends would corroborate the statement. The police would also find out that Grace had taken her necklace from the vault specifically for her husband's birthday. Alec would say she'd showed it to him at lunch, and that he'd been touched by her act.

THE POLICE might or might not dig up his affair with Myra. If they did, it would be obvious that he and Myra had broken up some time ago. If they went so far as to question her, he was reasonably certain that she'd cover up.

"Alec Condon?" she'd say. "I haven't seen him in months, and what's more, I don't want to. After the way he threw me over, we're finished."

Around six that evening he garaged the car and entered the house via the front door. He unlatched it and called upstairs.

"Grace?"

"Oh, Alec!" she said. "Come up, won't you?"

"I thought I'd go over to the studio for a little while."

She came to the head of the stairs. "Now? On your birthday? When I'm wearing my necklace just for you? Please—at least come up and look."

"Sure," he said amiably, and he climbed the staircase.

She was wearing a long, velvet gown, and he blinked. "You're all dressed up."

"I have to be, when I wear this," she said, touching the necklace. "Isn't it nice?"

"Very."

"I thought we might go out to dinner. Would you like to?"

He hesitated before answering. In order to give himself plenty of time to burn the weapon and possibly some other articles along with it, he'd counted on not "discovering" the body until midnight. Furthermore, he'd visualized it as being found in a dressing gown and he'd expected to say that she'd retired early, while he'd gone over to his studio. But now, seeing the way she was dressed, he saw that he'd have to change the original plan and advance his time schedule.

So be it, he thought. He'd manage.

"Dinner out will be fine," he said. "I'll make a reservation."

"I already did," she said. "Nine o'clock, at the Hermitage."

Again he made his calculations. Kill her at a quarter of eight, then wait until eight for Toosh to arrive. Then over to the studio in order to clean up and dispose of the weapon. He'd discover the body at

eight-thirty and call the police at once. Nothing wrong with that, provided Toosh came promptly. But could Alec rely on that? He decided he had to.

"You think of everything," he said to Grace, with excessive politeness. "I'd better shower and get dressed."

"That will be nice," she said. He agreed.

At seven-fifteen he took the teak piano leg from his closet. Barefoot, he tiptoed down the back stairs and, walking softly, he entered the big living room. He placed the weapon next to the couch, where it would be out of sight. Then, still moving stealthily, he returned to the rear stairs and went up to his room. At seven-thirty he emerged again, but noisily, whistling raucously.

"Grace?" he called out. "Ready?"

"But it's so early. We can't go yet."

"I know. Let's sit down in the living room and wait. I like it there."

"That would be nice," she said.

The living room, ample enough to seat a dozen guests comfortably, was in semi-darkness. The street lamp, casting a series of beams through three long windows, struck the coffee table, the near end of the couch and the mahogany secre-



tary-desk. Grace started to switch on the lights, but he stopped her.

"No. Wait a minute."

She obeyed, but in the dim light, her expression seemed strangely hesitant. "Why, Alec? Why?"

"Come here," he said.

She advanced towards him, not quite smiling, sensing that he wanted something unusual from her and hoping it would be pleasant.

"Turn around a moment," he said. "Your dress—isn't it torn?"

"I don't think so," she said, "but—"

When her back was to him, he struck. She fell with scarcely a sound, and he clubbed her again, twice, until he was certain she was dead. Then he took the gloves from his pocket and leaned down to unfasten the necklace, but the gloves were too thick and too awkward for him to manipulate the delicate catch.

He took them off and noticed the blood on them. They'd have to be burnt, along with the piano leg. Luckily it was a cool evening, lighting a fire in his studio wouldn't look suspicious, and if later on the police decided to take the fire apart and sift the remains, the gloves would be indistinguishable ashes and the weapon

would be just one more charred log. He had nothing to worry about.

Nevertheless his hands shook. The light was bad and he couldn't see how the catch worked. Suddenly, in a flash of rage, he ripped at the necklace and tore it off, scratching her skin and jerking up her head. It thumped down, and he staggered back.

He was breathing heavily and he began talking to himself. "Take it easy. Nothing to worry about. Everything is like she'd want it to be—real nice!"

At the word, he let out a guffaw of laughter, but he cut himself off at once. Still, the momentary outburst steadied him, and he went about the rest of his business as unemotionally as if it was a daily chore. Walk over to the coffee table and place the necklace on the edge, squarely in the light. Return to the couch and move it, so that the body will be screened off. Then sit down and wait.

It was twenty of eight. What do you do while you sit near the body of your wife and wait for a thief to come in and help himself to a piece of jewelry?

You take a memo pad from the desk and start to write down every item that remains to be done. But, before you put down the first word, you warn yourself not to. You have to



dispose of the sheet with the writing on it, so what good is the memo? And besides, you have to worry about the pencil impression left on the second sheet. So you replace the pad and you check the items mentally, one by one. Then you look at your watch. Five minutes have gone by.

Alec thought of the money he'd inherit and of the stocks Grace had invested in. He tried to review them in his mind, starting with American Tel and Tel and ending up with Zenith. He was partway through when he heard the front door open. He ducked down behind a chair, and peeked over the top of it.

The man who came in was not Toosh. He was taller, heavier and somehow menacing. He hesitated at the entrance to the living room, glanced around and then spotted the necklace. He walked over and picked it up.

Alec, panic-stricken that the wrong man had the necklace and that Toosh would arrive later on and make a fuss, accuse Alec of breaking his word, stood up and called out sharply.

"You. What are you doing here?"

The man swung around to face the direction of the voice, and he hunched up his huge shoulders and peered into the half-light. He loomed up threat-

eningly, as if he was spoiling for a fight. Nevertheless his words were almost apologetic.

"I didn't expect anybody to be around," he said. "Who are you?"

"I'm asking the questions. You walk into a house and grab the first thing you see. Put it back—hear me?"

The big man examined the necklace then glanced at Alec, still partly hidden in the darkness.

"Never mind names," the guy said. "Toosh sent me."

"What for?"

"You ask too many fool questions. Toosh got a job he couldn't turn down. What's it to you? You wanted somebody to lift this, and that's me. Any objections?"

"Beat it," Alec said. His voice came out in a croak, and he repeated the words, cracking them out hysterically. "Beat it. Get out!"

The big man didn't move.

"You got a nerve," he said. "Invite me in and then get mad over nothing. Something wrong around here?"

Alec didn't answer. The big man snorted, held the necklace up to the light and inspected it carefully. Apparently it met with his approval. He muttered something, put the necklace in his pocket and went out. He closed the door gently.

Alec, staring into the darkness, smiled.

"I did it," he said, with quiet satisfaction. "I did it. Me, Alec Condon—I'm free, and I'm rich!"

He felt a vast relief and he wanted to run, to shout or dance or go driving into the night. He thought of Myra waiting for him. Then he thought of the ordeal ahead, and he focused on the program that he'd set himself.

He went about his task efficiently. Move the couch back to where it belongs. Overturn a chair or two to make it look as if Grace had put up a struggle. Alec, surveying the scene and noting details, realized that he'd done precisely the right thing in tearing the necklace from her neck, for it built up the picture of violent robbery. He knocked over a lamp and heard the bulb break. So much the better.

All he had to do now was return to his studio, light a fire and drop the weapon and the blood-stained gloves in it. Until

eight-thirty or so he'd stare at the flames and think of Myra. Then he'd return to the main house and start the crucial performance of pretending to find the body before notifying the police.

He felt supremely confident as he left the house via the back entrance, crossed the lawn to his studio and climbed the two steps to the small porch fronting the studio. He pushed open the door and reached for the switch. Before he touched it, lights were snapped on. In the blaze he saw Grace's friends clustered at the rear of the big room.

"Surprise!" they called out. Then, on signal, they began to sing.

"Happy birthday to you, Happy birthday to you, Happy birth—" Then, as their eyes grew accustomed to the light and they saw him standing there, holding a broken piano leg and a pair of stained gloves, they stopped.

So did Alec Condon.

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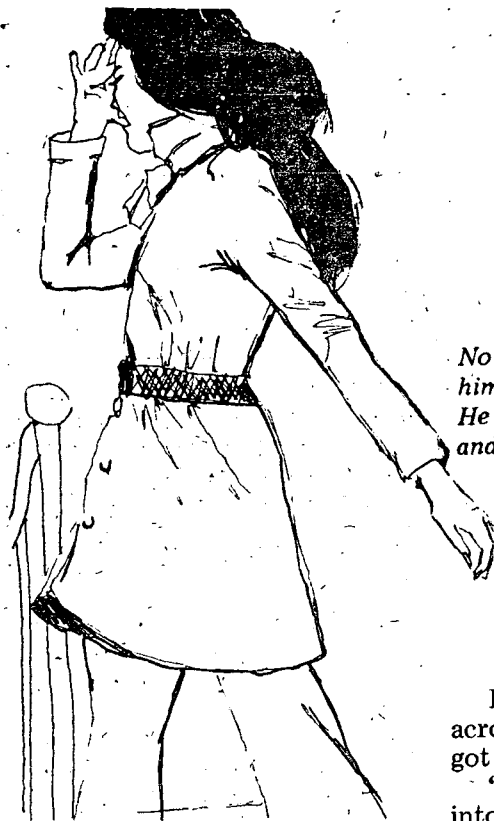
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# BLUE MOON

by  
GIL  
BREWER



*No woman was going to cheat on him and live to laugh about it. He just wanted to catch them—and prove that she was a liar.*

I CAME ACROSS the vacant lot toward the back of the house. We were out of town a way, and I always thought it might prevent things from happening. It hadn't. I jumped the fence, and walked through the garden toward the rear door, making it as quiet as I could. I left my lunch bucket beside the porch, and carefully opened the door.

Billy bounced at me from across the kitchen. "Daddy! I got a muff-whump."

"Fine," I said, trying to see into the other room. There was no sign of him. I hadn't heard him run. So maybe they were planning to meet later.

"See, Daddy?" Billy said. He held up a couple strings with a dirty piece of wood attached to the ends.

"Where's Mommy?"

Billy grinned slyly. The kid was getting to be exactly like her. She probably gave him lessons. She'd be more likely to give Ginny lessons. But she

would see that Billy kept his mouth shut. Billy was four and a half, and Ginny was six.

"Where is she?"

Billy pointed toward the living room, and began doddling the strings and the piece of wood up and down.

I went in there.

The radio was playing "*Blue Moon*," with Sinatra singing the way he did.

"Hi!"

She leaped up from the couch like she'd been pricked. Her eyes were all round and muzzy. I wondered if she'd been out with him, maybe making the rounds. I wouldn't put it past her. She had on pants and a long white jacket. That sweetheart of a face registered surprise.

"What're you doing here?" she asked quickly.

I went over and turned off "*Blue Moon*." It was our tune. An oldie, but loaded with nostalgia. I had loved her very much, and she had loved me. It had been something back then.

I said, "I took the day off. Didn't feel so hot."

"But, Richard. You'll be docked. We need that money."

"Yeah."

I wanted to ask her where she was hiding him. You've got to understand, I wouldn't put anything past her. She was always whacky. I'd used to

think that whackiness was cute. And she looked so good.

I mean, you'd never guess she played it the way she did. Once I saw him waiting on the corner, right when I went to work. It was before I knew. After I caught on, they worked it like ghosts. He would appear and vanish fast.

Once I nearly caught her. He'd just left by the side door. I'd heard him running, and her face was all red, her eyes kind of wild and hot.

Right now she'd been working a jig-saw puzzle on the card table. She was a great one for jig-saw puzzles.

She moved around the table. Then she kind of glanced toward the bedroom door. Just a flick of those eyes. She looked a little guilty.

I started for the bedroom.

"Richard? I think you should go back to work. We can't afford to have you take days off."

I didn't pay her any attention. I went on into the bedroom, and looked around. It was quiet, and smelled of sleep. The bed wasn't made yet. The Venetian blinds were drawn, but a finger of yellow Florida sunlight touched the floor. It looked okay, and there was no sign of him.

I stepped around the big cedar chest, and went to the

closet. Just clothes, that was all. But anger seeped through me. I knew he'd been here already this morning. It was nearly noon. I stared at the bed.

How could she? With the kids, and all.

Sure. She probably sent the kids out. Cripes. A kind of cold madness was all through me. I was sick with it. Because she would do this to me, after all I'd done for her, and everything. How I had loved her. Well, maybe that was gone.

I stood by the cedar chest and thought about it.

She came in the bedroom doorway, and stood there, looking at me, one hip shot out, the way she'd do it. Her eyes were all big and muzzy and baby-like. Innocent eyes. That was it. Innocent. Cripes.

"Why did you come home?"

"I was just beat. That laundry knocks me out, Beverly. You stand there sorting clothes all day, you'd know how it is. Cripes."

"Don't say that. I don't like it. Ginny will start saying it again. She imitates, you know that. You're her father."

"Cripes, cripes, cripes!" I couldn't even swear in my own home, if you called it swearing.

I wanted to ask her where he was. Then you could see she was satisfied about something. She was like a computer feeding

statistics. She was content. He'd got away somehow, that was it. She was safe.

"What're you going to do?" she asked.

"Nothing." Then I caught on. She would be meeting him someplace, that was it. They had a plan. I was in the way. And it went all through me, like knives, and dirty garbage. How could she do this? Well, she could, and did.

She could do anything, and stand right there and look clean and innocent. They were ghosts, that's what. Nobody could catch them.

Last night she'd been nervous as hell, too. It told me something. It showed me she was waiting for today. They had something planned.

I went over to the bureau and opened the top left hand drawer, and looked in at it. It lay there so neat, with a dull sheen. A pre World War I German Luger, nine millimeter. It was loaded, and it waited with a kind of steely patience. My hand inadvertently moved toward it. I slammed the drawer.

The front doorbell rang. I heard one of the kids run like crazy, yelling, "I get it, Mommy!"

I went out there, making it fast. Of course, he wouldn't come to the door like that.

Ginny had the door open. Two men stood there. A plumpish, red-faced one, in a blue suit, and a thin, lantern-jawed guy wearing a light tan jacket.

"Mr. Hudson?" They were cops, it was plain.

"Yeah."

"Is Mrs. Hudson in?"

"Sure."

"Could we see her a minute?"

I went back and motioned to Beverly. She came out of the bedroom and stood by the door.

The lantern-jawed guy gave me the eye, then lifted his brows at Beverly.

"What is it?" she asked with that way of hers.

I stood there.

The lantern-jawed guy's face was slightly red.

"What do you want?" Beverly asked.

"Well, all right," the lantern-jawed one said. "I've got to ask, and I don't like embarrassing you, that's all."

"Embarrass me?"

The plump one nodded. "D'you know an Albert Griner?"

I stood there. That was his name.

Beverly was plenty flustered. Her face was red, her neck red, her hands twining in front.

"No," she said. "I don't

know any Albert Griner. Why should I?"

Smooth. She was suddenly like ice.

"Mrs. Hudson. I'm sorry, believe me. But we saw some letters at Albert Griner's place. They had your name on them."

She stood there.

"Mr. Griner didn't show up for work today. His mother hasn't seen him since yesterday noon. She's worried. He's just vanished. He's nowhere."

"Get out," she said coldly, but fast.

"Mrs. Hudson," the plump one said. "You'd better level with us. This is Sergeant Whitted. And I'm Roy Hasseker. We're from police headquarters."

She glanced at me and you could see it was all gone inside her. She gave up.

"I haven't seen him."

"Not at all? Not even yesterday?"

"Not even yesterday."

"You're positive?"

"I'm absolutely sure."

"Well, thanks, Mrs. Hudson. We'll be in touch."

She closed the door and leaned against it and watched me. Her lips had a white ring around them.

"So his name is Albert Griner?" I said.

"Richard. I was going to tell you everything. Today. You've



watching. Billy had his muff-whump, jiggling it. Ginny said something very softly, but I couldn't say what.

"I'm supposed to believe you were going to tell me?" I said.

"You've got to believe that, Richard." She was nervous as a cat. "You've simply got to. He wouldn't take no for an answer. He just kept coming."

"Where were you planning to meet him, Beverly?"

She came on loud. "Don't say that. It's not true. It's all over. I want you, Richard—just you—and Ginny and Billy. I want us to be a happy family. I made a mistake. You've got to forgive me, Richard. You've got to!"

I'm telling you, it was like fire inside me. I couldn't control it. I hated her guts. I hated her so hard, I was all wild. She could stand there and look at me and lie. It was all through her, the lie. You could see it.

"I want us to be happy," she said. She spoke quickly, now. "You've got to believe me. I want you. I love you. I'd do anything for you. We've got to preserve our marriage."

"Quit it. I'll bust out laughing."

Her eyes were wet now. She stepped close. "Please, Richard. I didn't know what to do. I was

got to believe that. Listen, it's all over. Did you know?"

"Yeah."

"I might know you'd know." She stepped up to me, trying to smile. "It's all over, Richard. I don't know what happened to me. I—I couldn't control myself. Now it's out in the open." Her chin bunched up. "You've got to believe me. He just kept coming here, and everything. I couldn't make him leave me alone. I was crazy, Richard—just crazy." Tears squeezed in her eyes.

Billy and Ginny stood there,



afraid—" She put one hand on my arm. I threw it off with a jerk. I stared at her and this cold feeling went through me.

"Richard—"

"Bitch."

"Don't call me that, not in front of the children."

She wrung her hands, standing there. Her eyes were plenty worried. She kept trying to say something, her lips moving, but she just swallowed and didn't speak. Then she got it out. "I was weak, Richard. But it's all over. He's not coming back. I'll never see him again. Forgive me." She came toward me.

I gave her a swat that jarred her. I hardly knew what I was doing. I just knew I never wanted to see her again, and that I had to do something or go mad. It was inside me like a cold steel bar.

"Run to the kitchen and play," I told the kids.

"Please, Richard."

I started for the bedroom. Oh, I'd seen him close up one time, in a bar. He had curly black hair, and a pug nose. And he grinned all the time; a self-satisfied grin, as though he got everything he wanted.

"Richard. Listen to me!"

I didn't even speak. I went over to the bureau, and took the Luger out of the drawer. I looked at her, there in the doorway.

"I'm sorry, Beverly. But you did this to the wrong guy, see? I couldn't live with you now. Knowing you'll probably meet him somewhere tomorrow."

She yelled it. "I'll never see him again! I love you." The words tumbled across one another. "Richard, you've got to believe me!"

"Good-by, Beverly."

I shot her in the stomach. The gun made a hell of a noise. I shot her again. She just stood there, and another slug caught her in the throat. Then she fell down.

The kids came running. They looked at me.

"What's a matter with Mommy?"

"She caught a bad cold," I said, standing there, numb with it.

"Mommy," Ginny said, squatting down by her. "Mommy."

Billy said, "Daddy says she caught a cold."

"That's right," I said.

I heard footsteps running outside, approaching the house. I went over to the window and saw the two of them, the plump one and the lantern-jawed one coming up on the porch.

Then I was wilder than ever. I had killed her. I knew that. But they weren't going to catch me.

The doorbell rang.

I threw the gun into the closet and barked at the kids, "Head for the kitchen. Beat it. Get out of here."

They ran off.

I went over to the cedar chest. I would get inside there. It was plenty big. Beverly's mother had given it to her. An heirloom. She had never been able to fill it.

I was out of my mind. I'd killed her, and I was glad, but I was crazy with it.

I opened the cedar chest.

Well, he lay there, with that

pug nose, and that curly black hair, staring up at nothing. He wasn't grinning. You could see the stab wounds in his chest, ruining his white Nehru shirt. Albert Griner. She had killed him.

I stood there.

They walked into the bedroom and looked at me. The lantern-jawed one came over and touched my arm.

"Mr. Hudson?"

I just stood there, staring down at him. She had been telling the truth.



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# THE VERY RELUCTANT CORPSE

by BRETT HALLIDAY

*Murder stalked its bloody way among the guests on the isolated island estate: anyone could be the next victim, and anyone could be the murderer. Then Mike Shayne took on the case, using Tim Rourke, his friend, as the bait...*



THE CHARTER BOAT *Daisy Belle* out of Islamorada on the Florida Keys had an outstanding day. The Detroit auto executive and his friends who paid the charter boated a six foot 'cuda with a mouthful of razor fangs, two sailfish and a near-record black marlin.

Just before dusk, on their way in to port from the Gulf Stream, the *Dairy Belle* also boated a corpse. The sharks hadn't gotten to the body yet, and there were still papers in the wallet in its pocket.

There was still a length of frayed rope tied around the ankles. Apparently, whoever put the body in the water had tied on a heavy weight, but the rope had been too old, had parted, and the corpse had come to the surface. It was swollen and sodden and very unpleasant to look at and worse to smell. If it had been a dead horse or pig they'd never have kept it on board for a minute.

The papers in the wallet said it was the body of Harvey Peckinbaugh, however—and in this

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world the remains of a Harvey Peckinbaugh are never just tossed back for the sharks to finish.

The charter boat skipper got on his radio phone instead and within minutes a Coast Guard Cutter was on the way. Within half an hour three helicopters full of newspaper and teevy people were on the tail of the cutter and there were special news bulletins out all over the country.

The name Harvey Peckinbaugh meant a couple of hundred million dollars and a great deal of political clout in a midwestern State.

Harvey had been beaten over the head before he was put in the water. He'd also been stabbed several times with a very sharp knife.

That's murder any way you call it. And murdering the likes of Harvey Peckinbaugh is news. Big news.

Somewhere between one and two in the morning the phone rang in the apartment Mike Shayne kept in an old but comfortable apartment hotel overlooking the Miami River close to its mouth.

It rang for three minutes before the big private detective got his head off the pillow, clamped one big hand over the instrument and grunted a "hello" in greeting.

"Mike, are you wide awake?"

Shayne recognized the voice as that of his longtime good friend Tim Rourke, ace feature writer for the *Miami Daily News*. "Hold on, Tim," he said, sitting up and swinging his legs over the side of the bed. "What's up."

"Come on down here," Tim Rourke said. "I'm in a little trouble and maybe you can help."

"Hold on a second," Shayne said, coming awake fully for the first time. "What kind of trouble are you in, and where are you?"

Rourke took a deep breath before replying. "I'm down here at Key Paradiso."

"The Peckinbaugh estate?" Shayne, like most Floridians, knew of the million dollar sportsman's "hideaway" Harvey Peckinbaugh had built some ten years earlier. "What are you doing down there?"

"It's a long story. I'll give you the details when I see you. But as you know I met the Peckinbaugh's some years ago when I handled the story of that lawsuit between his manager and himself. You remember, when Peckinbaugh's companies were being broken up by the Justice Department and that manager of his tried to get more of the pie than his salary."

"Yeah, I remember. I also seem to recall Peckinbaugh threatening to shoot him in the courtroom."

Rourke laughed. "Yeah, Harvey P. had a temper. Lucky for him, the manager's doing a twenty year stretch right now. Anyway," he went on, his voice becoming serious. "Everybody's being held down here for the night and probably most of tomorrow morning. We got Sam Hill, the Monroe County Sheriff himself, half his deputies and a couple of police from Peckinbaugh's home ground all nosing around. And last night, some nut put a note in my pocket, claiming that I witnessed the murder, but he'll pay me to keep quiet."

"Did you tell Hill?"

"You better believe it! Hiding something down here right now would be impossible. So he wants me to hang around awhile longer. Which is trouble for me. But at least I'm getting an exclusive. And Della, that's Mrs. Peckinbaugh to you, shamus, hinted that she'd like to have a private investigator of her own to keep track on the locals. Naturally I thought of you."

"Natch, friend." Shayne grinned.

"So if you get down here by morning, you can nose around a bit and see what's going on,

and then drive me back to Miami."

"What happened to your car?"

"I rode down with Peckinbaugh. And he's in no shape to drive me back. So if you hop to it, you can have the pleasure."

Shayne grunted as he stood up. "Okay, I'll be there soon as possible."

"And shamus," Rourke said, "Better bring a gun. Looks like the murderer is still around. We might have breakfast with him when you get here."

"I'll cross my fingers," Shayne said.

## II

MIKE SHAYNE was starting to dress almost as fast as he hung up the phone.

He called his beautiful assistant, secretary and right-hand-woman Lucy Hamilton at her apartment and told her about Tim Rourke's early morning call.

"I'm not sure what it's all about," he told her, "but Tim thinks I'd better get on down to Key Paradiso. If I can't do anything else, at least I can drive him back to Miami."

"If somebody thinks he witnessed the killing of Mr. Peckinbaugh, Tim could be in trouble," Lucy Hamilton said. "So could you, Michael. I suppose you have

to go down there, but please take care of yourself."

"Don't worry about me, Angel," Mike Shayne said.

Even though he wasted no time, it was nearly daylight before Shayne could reach Key Paradiso. He had to pack his bag and then get his car out of the garage where he kept it and make a drive of more than two hours duration south on U.S. Highway One.

Late at night as it was, there was still a surprising amount of traffic on the narrow bridges spanning the water between the Keys.

Key Paradiso itself was off the main road, lying about a quarter of mile out to the East in the Atlantic. It was actually a small island with only about twenty acres of land above high tide mark. Harvey Peckinbaugh had bought the entire Key, erected houses, recreation facilities and even built a private causeway out from the main road. It was the sort of estate that only a man who was many times a millionaire could afford.

There was a gatehouse and swinging gate at the Key Paradiso end of the causeway. When Mike Shayne pulled up there was a private security guard in a fancy blue and white uniform standing by the gate.

With him was a uniformed Sheriff's Deputy that Mike Shayne had known when he had been on the City of Miami police force some years back.

"Hi there, McGee," the big redhead said. "I didn't know you were working for Sam Hill these days. How are things?"

"Well, well," McGee said, "If it isn't Sherlock Holmes in person. Still setting the private eye business on its ear in Miami, Mike?"

"Not at the moment," Shayne said easily. "Right now I've got a client up at the big house on the Key here."

"I don't know about that," The private guard said self-importantly. "Right now we got orders to keep the public out of here. I don't think we can let you through."

"Oh come off it," the deputy, McGee, told him. "This here ain't press or general public. Mike Shayne's an old friend of my boss. Practically on the force himself, so to speak. Swing that gate up and let him by."

"If you say so," the guard said. He opened the gate reluctantly and let Shayne drive onto the island.

From there on it was only a short drive through scrub mahogany and wild lime tree groves to the big house on the seaward side of the Key. Dawn



was breaking with the beautiful, translucent pearly light peculiar to the Florida Keys. The sea lay still and flat as a mirror.

The Peckinbaugh mansion was a sprawling two story structure with gables and big porches. There was a huge Olympic swimming pool off to one side and a dock big enough to moor a dozen large boats. A deepwater channel had been dredged to the dock, and there was also a sizeable artificially constructed turning basin for the boats. At the moment there was only one yacht moored, Peckinbaugh's own HARVEY II, and a much smaller sport fisherman.

At the shore end of the dock there was a standing light fixture. Nobody had bothered to turn the light off as yet. Under it was a bench, and on the bench was a slender figure in blue slacks and a blue and white check sports jacket which Shayne recognized at first glance. He left his car parked on the grass in front of the big house and walked down to the dock.

Tim Rourke got up off the bench and hurried to meet him. "Well you finally got here, maestro," the lanky newsman greeted his friend. "I've been up all night answering questions, and now and then asking a

few of my own. I need sleep and breakfast and a good stiff drink—in reverse order. Mostly I need to relax, but didn't want to do that till you showed up."



"What's all this about, Tim?"

"This is what it's about." Rourke took a sheet of paper out of his jacket pocket and handed it over to his big friend.

It was a piece of embossed Peckinbaugh stationery from one of the writing desks in the mansion. The message it bore was typed carefully in the center of the sheet:

*"Rourke, we've got a Mexican standoff. You saw me, but I saw you too. As long as the amount you name is a reasonable one, we can do business. Do I need to say more?"*

"Well," Mike Shayne asked, "does he need to say more? Who wrote this thing?"

"That's what I need you to find out for me," Rourke said, "I haven't got the faintest idea. He thinks I know him, but I swear, Mike, I don't even know if it's a man or a woman. This was in my pocket last night after dinner. That's why I called you."

"Who had a chance to put it there?"

"Anybody. Anybody at all. We ate buffet style, milling around the ground floor. Everybody was upset by the news they'd found Harvey, his body I mean. Any one of twenty guests or that many servants

could have planted this thing on me. Mike, let's go in. I'm tired and I need a drink."

Mike Shayne looked at his friend and agreed. Tim Rourke showed the effects of a long and sleepless night. His face was drawn, and his thin hands trembled slightly.

"Okay," Shayne said.

"We'll go back to the house," Rourke said. "Some of the servants must be up by now. I'll have breakfast and a bottle brought up to my room. Then I can fill you in on this business."

Half an hour later the two friends were seated by the window of Tim Rourke's guest room looking out over the sea towards the Gulf Stream. A serving table between them held plates of scrambled eggs and sausage, hot rolls with butter, a covered bread basket, oranges and mangos and a pot of steaming coffee. There was also a bottle of brandy which they were using to lace the coffee.

They ate in silence for a few minutes. Then Mike Shayne said, "Okay now. Give me the details."

Tim Rourke looked more relaxed. "The last time anybody saw old Harvey alive," he said, "was after dinner two nights back. The house was full of people and there was drinking

and partying going on. Harvey was in the den on the ground floor playing poker with some of his business and political buddies. Sam Hill's boys can give you the list.

"About one in the morning Harvey got up from the table. He was losing heavily, but he didn't cash in his hand. Just said he needed air and was going to take a stroll and see how the party was going. The next time anybody saw him was when that boat pulled his body out of the water."

"You mean nobody in this place saw him after he left the poker table? Nobody?"

"Somebody did," Rourke said. "Somebody killed old Harvey and he had to see him to do it. Then again I may have seen him, too. At least, whoever typed me that little mash-note seems to think I did." Rourke took a drink of coffee.

"Suppose you get down to the nitty gritty of why anybody would think a thing like that."

"I'm getting to that," Rourke said, "as fast as I can. Just give me a chance. As a matter of fact I'm not too clear about the whole thing in my own mind. You have to remember the party had been going on for a couple of days by then and it was a real bash. A real swinger. There was this girl. We'd been up in her room after

dinner and we'd had quite a few drinks."

"I'll bet you had," Mike Shayne grinned sardonically.

"Okay, okay," Rourke said. "So I was a little sozzled maybe. Anyway the girl was more. She passed out and that stopped the fun, so I did just what Harvey told the boys he was going to do. I went out for air."

"That's when you saw somebody?"

"Not at first. I walked around for quite a bit," Rourke said. "After a while I was down by the formal gardens along the shore north of the house. There's shrubbery there and trees and benches. Dark. You know, a great place for couples. Anyway I was walking in there when I came on two people. They were under the shade of some trees."

"You couldn't recognize them?"

"I couldn't even see if it was men or women. I thought first it was a couple necking. Then they seemed to be wrestling. I thought: 'she's trying to break loose from him.' I couldn't really see enough to tell if it was a couple or a fight or what. Then one figure stepped back and it looked like that one was punching or poking the other."

"Or sticking a knife into him?"

"Or knifing him. Only I didn't see any knife. I didn't care anyway. It was none of my business. I turned away. I thought somebody yelled at me, but I wasn't sure. I walked off."

"That must have been when he recognized you," Shayne said. "Pass me that basket of rolls over there. I'm still hungry."

Rourke obliged.

When Mike Shayne opened the napkin in the bread basket there weren't any rolls inside, though.

There was a dead toad impaled on a razor sharp steak knife.

"Oh, crap!" Tim Rourke said.

### III

MIKE SHAYNE wrapped the napkin back around the gruesome little reptile and left it in the basket. Then he picked up the brandy bottle and filled his and Tim Rourke's coffee cups with the fiery amber liquid.

"I think your friend means business," he said.

"I guess so," Rourke agreed.

"First the note and then this for a warning. I'd better get down and tell Hill about this latest development. And after that, maybe I can get a little shut-eye. What do you plan to do?"

"You've worked with me

enough times to know the answer to that," Shayne said. "I want to meet the cast of characters. Who was here two nights ago that could have a reason to kill Harvey Peckinbaugh? Who do you think might have done it?"

"That won't be easy to say," Tim Rourke said. "There were about thirty people here. They still are, by special request of Sheriff Sam Hill. About half of that crowd are business or political pals of Peckinbaugh from his home State, and their wives or girl friends. I don't really know any of them well enough to know how they feel about the late departed. You can ask Bill Buzby about them. He was Harvey's secretary, confidential man and general right bower. He'd know the poop on that crowd."

"I'll talk to him," Shayne said. "Could he have done it himself?"

"Buzby? I haven't the faintest idea. I don't know of any motive on his part."

"A confidential assistant could have one," Shayne said. "How about the rest of your happy group?"

"Mostly just friends from Miami like me," Rourke said. "Most of us didn't really know Harvey very well, but his food and liquor was triple-A good so we came for the ride. Then of

course there was Harvey's harem."

"His what?"

"That's what we called them among ourselves. It was a funny grouping for a party. His wife, Della, is here of course. Or maybe 'of course' is the wrong way to put it because the big room with the king-size waterbed down at the end of the hall has his girl friend Dolly Dawn in it. We figure that's where Harvey did most of his bouncing around. Then to top the whole thing off Slim and Sally Peters are in one of the guest cabins."

"Slim Peters the gambler?" Shayne asked. "The one who owns the casino in Dominica?"

"That's the one," Rourke agreed. "Only what you probably don't know is Slim's wife Sally is also the ex Mrs. Harvey Peckinbaugh."

"Whew," Shayne whistled.

"That's right," Rourke confirmed. "Wife, ex-wife and current hotlips all at the same party. Now who had what motive to do which to who."

The redhead sat back, looking out through the window at the rising sun in the east. One big hand reached up and the thumb and forefinger tugged at his ear-lobe. That was a sign Shayne was in deep thought, so Rourke sat quietly and did not interrupt.



-CHIEF WILL GENTRY

After a while the newsman reached out for the bottle and started to refill the cup in front of him.

About that time they began to hear the sounds of plates clattering and of voices from the dining room on the ground floor under their windows.

"That will be breakfast," Rourke said. "It's served buffet style like in an English country house. I don't suppose many of the guests got much sleep last night, what with one thing and another. They'll be down early."

"We'll go down too, then," Mike Shayne said. "We can make like we're eating, and it'll be a good chance for you to finger the suspects to me."

The dining room was huge, at least thirty by sixty feet in dimension, with French windows opening out to the wide verandah and the sea along the front. The guests helped themselves from a variety of hot and cold dishes on a long sideboard, and ate either at the main table or at one of several smaller tables which had been set up on the porch just outside the dining room.

They looked nervous and tense and were eating lightly. A few, most of whom Shayne recognized as Miami socialites, ate, with good appetite and were busy talking among themselves. Those were the people who obviously considered themselves above suspicion and who had little or nothing to gain or lose through the death of their quondam host. They tended to favor the outside tables.

Another group, mostly older men already wearing dark business suits suitable for a plane flight, were Harvey Peckinbaugh's business and political associates.

These men ate little and talked less. They looked alert and harrassed. Shayne assumed

that every one of them had something at stake as a result of the murder.

The servants, too, looked nervous and even frightened. They moved about quickly as if unsure of themselves, hesitated before touching anything, and tried to keep an eye at all times on a small group of men at the head of the big table.

Mike Shayne recognized these as Sheriff Sam Hill and some of his top grade plainclothes men. That was where the big private detective headed at once.

Sam Hill was busy eating and trying to talk with his mouth full. He didn't see Shayne and Rourke coming at first. When he did he sat back in his chair and eyed them while his jaws worked on a mouthful of ham and biscuit.

"Hello Sam," Shayne said. "You got this thing all wrapped up already?" He dropped the basket with its grisly contents on the table in front of the Sheriff.

Sam Hill took two swallows to get his mouth clear. When he did, he said, "What in the blazing noonday sun are you doing here, Shayne? And what's this thing?"

"I just happened to be down this way," Mike Shayne said easily, "so I stopped by to give Tim here a ride back to Miami.

I figured after what happened the festivities would be fizzling out pretty quick down here. But then Rourke and I found this. Served up with breakfast."

"Oh Lordy," Sam Hill said. "I don't know what we got here. Old Peckinbaugh didn't die of no virus of course, but we don't know even where he was killed. Now there's a skiff missing. Was he killed here and did somebody row him out and tip him into the Gulf Stream? Or did he row out himself and meet somebody who knifed him? And now these threats. I got to question everybody on this place."

"Speaking of that, Sam," Shayne said, "when do you think you'll be through with Tim?"

Sam Hill turned to Tim Rourke and said, "Okay, Shayne, you can have him any time you want. Don't be in too much of a hurry though. We could maybe use your help."

"Great," said Rourke, "I'm only too glad to get off this place. I'll leave my little friend in your hands. Glad it's your job, not mine!"

"Yeah," Sheriff Hill grunted.

At that moment a younger man came hurrying across the big room to where the sheriff sat. He was darkly handsome in a curiously stereotyped way. His sports jacket and slacks

were casual, but his manner put him with the business-suit men rather than the Miami social set.

Mike Shayne's hunch that this would be Bill Buzby, the late Mr. Peckinbaugh's confidential man, was confirmed as soon as he spoke.

"Sheriff, when are you going to begin letting people out of here? Some of Mr. Peckinbaugh's business associates are very important people. They want to get back west, you understand. Pick up the chips that the old man's death has scattered."

"I have to ask some questions before I let everybody go," the Sheriff protested.

"Of course. Of course," Buzby said. "We all understand that. On the other hand you can't just hold all these people indefinitely as if they were ordinary joes. Why, one of them is Lieutenant Governor of our State. Another is the third or fourth biggest car dealer West of the Mississippi. That sort of people. . . . Can't you just take a brief statement from them and let them go? Men like that are easy enough to locate if you need them later on. You know that."

"Easy to locate," Sam Hill said, "and hard as the devil to extradite if I let them out of my jurisdiction. Still, there's some-



thing to what you say. The question is—did any of these men have reason to want Peckinbaugh dead? Answer me that."

"That's easy," Bill Buzby said. "They all wanted him dead. Everybody who knew Harvey Peckinbaugh wanted him dead."

#### IV

"THAT MAKES it interesting," Sam Hill said. His tone said; well, I'll be damned, but he didn't put that part into words.

"I mean it," Bill Buzby said again. "I really don't think there's a man in the lot of his associates who isn't glad the old man's dead. He was rough and tough to deal with. You did it on his terms if you did it at all. He was greedy. That old man had money to burn, but he wouldn't put a cent in any deal that didn't guarantee—and I mean guarantee—him a clear forty percent profit before he started. His forty percent came off the top too, if you know what I mean."

"I know what you mean," Mike Shayne said. "We've got a couple of characters like that right here in Dade County, Florida. Real prominent citizens, but there'll be dancing in the streets at their funerals."

Buzby gave the big redhead a

direct look. "Do I know you?" "This is Mike Shayne," Sam Hill told him. "He's a private dick from Miami and a real good friend of mine. You can trust him."

"Glad to meet you," Buzby said, and then turned back to Sheriff Hill. "Not only was old Harvey greedy, he was mean. He liked to make his people squirm and see them hurt. That's the biggest way he got his kicks. They all hate—I mean they hated him."

"Not enough to kill him, though," Mike Shayne said. "Or at least not enough to kill him night before last and here in the Florida Keys."

Both men turned to him.

"What makes you say that?"

"The skiff," Shayne said. "You tell me the old man was found floating north of here and near the Gulf Stream. You also say there's a skiff missing."

"These men you're talking about are westerners, not boatmen. They wouldn't know what to do in a skiff. It needs somebody familiar with Florida to put a body in the Gulf Stream, or even know where the Gulf Stream is. Even if one of those cowboy types had tried it, he'd have brought the skiff back. That's the way he'd have come back himself. Anybody trying to land along the Keys and walk back would have had

to give himself away when he came in through the gatehouse, wouldn't he?"

"I never thought of that," Buzby said.

"I did," Sheriff Sam Hill told them. "Go on, Shayne. What happened to the skiff? Suppose Peckinbaugh took it out himself and ran into a lobster boat? There's been lobster poaching and trap stealing back and forth to the Bahamas for months. Suppose he got caught close to the traps and knifed for a thief?"

"A lobster thief in a two hundred dollar sports jacket and hundred dollar shoes?" Shayne said. "I read the description of the corpse in the papers and saw it on teevy. Those lobstermen aren't idiots. If they'd found Harvey, they'd just have pointed him back to shore, skiff and all."

"What do you think did happen then. . . . and where's that ever-loving skiff?" It was one of the Monroe detectives who asked the question.

"I think Peckinbaugh was killed right here on Key Paradiso," Mike Shayne said. "I think whoever killed him put him in the skiff right here. Then he bolted an outboard motor to the skiff. He could get it out of the boathouse at the same time. One of those little electric one-horsepower jobs

would be perfect and I'll bet there's a rack of them in the boathouse.

"Then the killer used his knife to punch a couple of small holes in the bottom of the skiff. Just enough to start slow leaks. He pointed the skiff out to sea, and shoved it off, but he didn't go with it. He just started the skiff out with the dead body in it and a weight tied to the body. He probably figured the slow leaks he started wouldn't actually sink the boat till it got out of the Gulf Stream.

"If he was right we never would have found Peckinbaugh even with the rope breaking. The Stream is deep and the currents would keep shoving the body on North till the sharks finished it. Where he went wrong was the boat sank well this side of the Stream in shallow water. The body came up and was found. Otherwise we'd just have a mystery instead of a murder."

"I have to admit that was clever," Buzby said. "I'd never have figured it out."

"Neither would most of old Harvey's midwestern friends," Sam Hill agreed. "I think we may be able to let them go after a short interrogation. Anyway, we'll talk to them first."

"Keep an eye out for one who has local friends who could

have given him the idea," Shayne said. "Come along, Tim. We'll leave the gentlemen to their business."

"Where did you ever think up all that?" Rourke asked as they left the group at the head of the table.

"What stuck in my craw was the skiff was missing but the murderer wasn't," Shayne said. "At least nobody mentioned anybody around here not accounted for. If the killer left with the body, he'd have brought the skiff back."

"Wouldn't that have been the smart thing to do anyway?" Rourke asked his friend.

"I think it would," Shayne said, "because then there'd have been nothing to indicate what had become of the body. Just go all the way out and put the body in the Gulf Stream and then come back. Nothing missing but old Harvey."

"Why wouldn't he do it that way?" Rourke persisted.

"Only two reasons I can think of," Shayne answered. "One would be a stupid killer, and I don't go for that. The other is the killer was somebody who didn't want to make the trip in the skiff because it would take a couple of hours and he'd be missed. Then when it was found Harvey was gone, the killer would have fingered himself by being gone."

"Who misses anybody at a party like this one was?"

"Only if the missing one is very prominent," Shayne said. "that narrows the list of possible suspects. Right now I want you to introduce me to what you called Harvey's Harem. Start with the widow Peckinbaugh. It's time I let her know I'm here."

Mrs. Della Peckinbaugh had not confined herself to the master suite of the waterfront mansion that morning, but was having a substantial breakfast at a small table set for two on the wide verandah. The second seat had been occupied by Bill Buzby before he had left to join the sheriff and his detectives.

Tim Rourke took Mike Shayne over and introduced him as "My friend from Miami."

Della Peckinbaugh gave him a long, level look before replying. She was a beautiful, auburn-haired woman in her early forties. The late Harvey P. had been seventy-three the week before he died. Della had large green eyes and a statuesque figure well set off by the simple linen dress she wore.

"I'm glad you're here, Mr. Shayne," she said finally. "I've heard of you of course. I guess anyone who reads very much news has. When I heard that Mr. Rourke knew you, I asked

him to phone Miami and ask you to come down and talk with me."

Shayne smiled. "That's flattering to say the least."

"I'm not trying to flatter you," she said. "Just to be honest. Harvey's death has been a real shock to me. I won't pretend that I'm grief stricken. If I did, it wouldn't fool you for long. Harvey's position and wealth were major reasons for my marriage. There was some affection at first, while he was busy courting me, but I'm afraid that was long ago. Still, with all of Harvey's faults I had no reason to kill him. It disturbs me that someone else did. I'll be honest with you. It shocks and, yes, frightens me."

"I was hoping you could tell me who wanted to kill your husband and what the motive was," Shayne said.

"On the contrary," Della Peckinbaugh said. "I'm counting on you to find out and tell me, Mr. Shayne."

She paused. Then, "You must find out and tell me before that same person decides to do the same thing to me as she did to Harvey."

## V

"GOOD LORD Della," Tim Rourke said. "You don't really mean that, do you? Harvey was



an overbearing man. He could be rough and tough, and he made enemies. But who on earth would want to murder you?"

She looked at Rourke.

"That's what I want your Mr. Mike Shayne to find out for me," Della Peckinbaugh said, and she wasn't smiling when she said it. "Honestly, gentlemen, I think this was a personal killing. Not based on politics or Harvey's business dealings, though God knows some of those may have made him bitter enemies. I think this was strictly a personal thing and that the killer has the same crazy, twisted reasons to murder me." She spoke calmly and with certainty.

"You sound very sure of yourself," the big redheaded detective told her.

"I am. Oh, believe me, I'm in fear for my life right this very minute."

"I believe you," Mike Shayne said. "I also think that if you're this sure of danger you can give me an educated guess where that danger is coming from. Who do you suspect killed your husband?"

"I don't want to say," Della Peckinbaugh said. "I don't have any real evidence, at least, not the sort that would stand up in court. I could be sued for accusing the wrong person."

"Anything you say to Mike will be absolutely confidential," Tim Rourke said. "I promise you that. You know he can do a better job if he knows who you suspect."

She thought it over.

"Alright, Mr. Shayne. I have to trust you. Go see the woman who calls herself Dolly Dawn."

"Your late husband's friend?"

"My late husband's girl friend, his infatuation, his open and shameless light-o'-love. I'm not stupid. I know about her as I know about all the others. She's the one."

"But why would she want to kill him? You're his legal wife and heir. What has she to gain?"

"You don't know my hus-

band," she said. "I do. He told the same lies to each of his mistresses in turn to bind them to him. He told each one that he had put her in his will for a bequest of a cool million dollars cash. It was a lie of course, but it did heat up their feelings for him. I could always tell just when he'd told the girl by the way they both behaved. Oh, don't look so shocked, Mr. Shayne. My Harvey was perfectly shameless in all the departments of his life."

"I guess I'm just a bit old fashioned in a few things," Shayne said.

"Only a few," Tim Rourke interjected.

"To tell the truth I'm like you," Della Peckinbaugh said. "I never quite got used to it myself—but that's the way he was. On top of that he would hint to each girl that he would divorce me and marry her if she continued to make him happy. That was mighty effective too. Then after a while, of course, he'd cool off or find another girl. That could be an awful shock."

"You think he was going to drop Dolly Dawn?" Shayne asked.

"I think he was about to and that she found it out, but hadn't found out yet that there wasn't any million dollar bequest in his will. There was no million for

Dolly, but she didn't know it yet. Isn't that a motive to kill?"

"Wrong, Della," said a new voice. It was Bill Buzby who had come up to the table just in time to overhear her last words.

"Wrong?" she said. "What on earth do you mean?"

"I mean that in Dolly's case there is a million dollar bequest—and she'll collect it too. Harvey had a codicil to his will executed only three months ago. Up till then he'd just talked about doing that, but for Dolly he actually went ahead. I had to call in the attorneys and witness."

"You never told me," Della said.

"I didn't expect him to die," Buzby said to the three of them. "How could I anticipate this? I just figured he'd change his mind after a while." He looked defensive.

"I wonder," Della Peckinbaugh answered. "Maybe he really did love this one. . . . Anyway, Mr. Shayne, I think you have enough of a motive to look into the young lady in depth. Don't you?"

"I'll talk to her," Shayne said.

One of the servants informed Shayne that, "Miss Dawn is still in her room. She had her breakfast sent up a little while back."

The two men went on up to the second floor of the mansion where the Master Suite and the quarters for the more important guests were located. The one assigned to Dolly Dawn was at the southeast corner looking out over the blue waters of the Atlantic Ocean.

They found the room easily.

Mike Shayne knocked loudly on the heavy door of the room. There was no answer. He knocked again, and this time realized the latch of the door hadn't caught. It moved a little under his fist. At the same time he and Rourke both thought they heard a low moan from inside.

Shayne pushed the door open. There was a partly-clad woman on the floor over by the window.

Shayne took a step unto the room.

The woman sat up and threw a knife, a silver hilted little Italian stiletto. If Mike Shayne hadn't dodged with lightning speed, it would have skewered his throat. As it was the point stuck half an inch into the solid wood of the door.

## VI

MIKE SHAYNE was into the room with the speed of a big jungle cat, ready to grab the

woman or pull his gun if necessary. Neither action was needed.

She just sat there on the floor with her hands in plain sight and looked at the two men as they came into the room.

"Who the hell are you?" she said then.

Shayne got the impression the knife hadn't really been meant for him, that she'd expected someone else to come through that door. It would have helped if he'd known who that other person was.

"I'm a real poor target for that sort of thing," he jerked his big thumb at the knife which was still quivering in the wooden panel of the door. "If you try that again, I'll take the shiv and make you eat it."

She sat there and looked up at him.

"I believe you would at that," she said.

Long red hair streamed down to rounded shoulders and even without makeup her face was roundly beautiful. She wore pajamas which neither restrained nor concealed the ripe curves of breast and thigh. Under her auburn brows were hard, alert, china blue eyes. Shayne got the impression they looked right through to his backbone.

"I've seen your picture in the papers," she said. "You've got to be Mike Shayne."

"That's me," Shayne said, "and I suppose you're Dolly Dawn."

She put back her head and rocked with gusty laughter. "Two minutes I see the great detective," she said between laughs. "Only two minutes and he goes as wrong as he could be."

"Who are you then? This is Dolly Dawn's room isn't it?"

"It's her room alright, but I'm not her. Ask your friend there who I am. He danced with me and did his best to do more the night before last. Or were you too sozzled to remember me, Tim?"

"This isn't Dolly Dawn," Tim Rourke confirmed. "This is Sally Peters, Slim's wife."

Mike Shayne was genuinely startled.

"I came to see Dolly," Sally Peters told him. She got up off the floor and went over to a portable bar near the window. There she poured a stiff three fingers of whiskey into a glass and tossed it down as a man would have done.

"The door was open when I got here, so I walked on in. A man, or maybe two men, I can't be sure, came up the hall and pushed in behind me. One of them gave me a karate chop from behind and that was it. Lights out. The next thing I knew you were coming through



the door. How did I know who you were?"

Shayne moved quickly about as she talked, checking the closets, bath and dressing room. There was no one else in the suite. "You didn't recognize the men or see or hear anything more?" He asked her.

"Neither would you have if you'd been me," she said bitterly. "Whoever it was who clipped me, he knew his business. A real pro that one." She poured another drink and tossed it off like the first.

"Don't you worry though, mister detective," she said. "If I do figure out who it is, I'll tell you. If Slim finds out first and locates him, all those fly-cops downstairs will really have somebody to nail for murder-one—and Slim's too good a man to lose."

"What did you want to see Dolly about?" Tim Rourke asked the woman.

"Are you kidding, buster?" she said. "The same thing you and the big shamus wanted to see her about. The same thing that hick sheriff downstairs wants to see her about. What else? I want to know what she knows about who wasted dear old Harve."

"You don't sound very sorry about his death," Mike Shayne said.

"Sorry?" she smiled grimly.



"Who's to be sorry? Harvey was a louse. He lived a louse and he died a louse. All the sex appeal that big bum had was in his safety deposit vaults tied up with red ribbon. Not that it wasn't enough to get me up to



the altar for the everloving vows of course."

"So."

"So I don't want to be blamed for knocking him off is what. I'm a practical gal if nothing else. Just my hard luck to be here when he died. I'll be a number one suspect and I know it."

She saw the puzzled look on their faces. She smiled and then continued.

"I'm in old Harvey's last Will and Testament for a cool ten million clam slice of the estate, in case you didn't know. It was part of the divorce settlement, and I had some high priced lawyers write it in so it would stick. So you see, I hated him and Slim hated him, and all we have to do is pull the lever to win the ten million dollar jackpot. Who else is gonna be the number one patsy around here today?"

"But you and Slim didn't pull the lever?"

"Do you think we did?" she asked. "Why would we pull a dumb stunt like that when all we have to do is wait? Why risk a rap for murder one when the apples are gonna fall off the tree into our laps anyway?"

"Suppose I believe you?" he said to her. "What you're saying makes a certain amount of sense. In that case who do you think arranged for your late

ex-husband's untimely departure from this world?"

She picked up the bottle as if to pour herself a third drink, but then shook her head and put it down again. "Two's enough. I don't want to look sozzled when the Law puts me on the grille. I'll level with you, buster. I really will. I think his dear wife Della is the one you want."

"Good God," said Rourke.

"She's got a better motive than anyone else," Sally Peters said. "I get to inherit ten million, but she gets the whole kazoo. God knows how much. Besides she has to live with him, put up with him, let him wipe his feet on her every day. Maybe she couldn't stand it any more than I could, only in her case she decided to take the fast way out. Why go through a divorce and get ten million when she can go the murder route and take the whole pot? You see what I mean, buster. I know you do."

That was all they were going to get out of Sally Peters at the moment, and both of them knew it. Out on the big porch near the railing Sam Hill and two of his dark suited detective officers were talking to a red-haired woman.

Mike Shayne almost did a double-take when he spotted them. This wasn't the woman

he would have picked for Dolly Dawn. This one was small, below medium height and with a slender figure. Her face was an oval under a mass of soft auburn hair and she was small-boned and graceful.

"That's Dolly?" Shayne said.

"Miss Dolly Dawn in person," Rourke said with a laugh, "and miscast for the part if you must go by the looks. It's really the body of Sally Peters that ought to be standing there if you ask me."

Even as he spoke the woman finished talking to Sheriff Hill and came back into the house. She recognized Tim Rourke and smiled at him. The lanky feature writer took Shayne over and introduced him.

"Another detective?" she said in a soft voice. "I've already told all I know to the Sheriff. If you don't mind . . . I'm afraid I'm quite upset this morning by all that's happened."

Shayne noted that she really did look rather pale and drawn, the first person he'd met yet who showed any feeling for the recently departed master of the house.

On the other hand, her feeling could actually just be fear that the Law might be closing in. It was impossible to tell.

"I don't think you understand," Shayne told her. "I'm sure Sam Hill has asked you

all the proper questions, and that really wasn't what we wanted to talk to you about. Actually we were looking for you because we were afraid you might be in some danger and we could help."

"Danger?" she said with what seemed like honest surprise. "I'm not in any danger that I know of."

"I'm surprised to hear you say that," Shayne said. "Sally Peters was slugged in your room only a little while back by two men. They might have been after you. Naturally we . . . ."

"There's something very wrong here," Dolly Dawn said, and looked him right in the eyes. "Personally, she's the kind who would fake such a scene. I wouldn't put it past her to have killed Harvey herself."

## VII

DOLLY DAWN must have seen the surprise in the faces of the two men, because she repeated what she'd just said. "I said goodnight to Sally and Slim Peters about two in the morning in the hallway outside my room door last night. I closed and locked the door when I went into the room. That is absolutely the last I've seen of either Sally or Slim. I don't know what she may have said

to you, and I don't really care. What—I just told you is the God's truth."

She said it with emphasis and with a ring of sincerity in her tones, so that Mike Shayne and Tim Rourke could only nod in agreement.

She turned away from the two men and started over to the stairway.

She didn't quite reach the landing before Sheriff Sam Hill came into the doorway from the porch and called out, "Attention everyone, please!"

Everyone on the ground floor stopped talking and turned towards the sheriff.

"As all of you know," Sheriff Hill announced, "It's been necessary to keep you here on Key Paradiso this long so that we could ask each of you a few questions. Most of you have been able to answer those questions to our satisfaction, so I'm not going to keep you here any longer. You are free to leave at any time. I only ask that you leave word with my men at the gate as to where you can be located in case of any new developments."

Someone in the archway to the dining room spoke up. "Does that mean you've solved the case, Sheriff? Or that you've given up?" The speaker gave a sarcastic laugh.

"It doesn't mean either

thing," the sheriff said. "Most certainly not that we've given up. We have certain leads to what took place here two nights ago. When we follow those up, there will be action taken. What I'm doing now only means that we are convinced most of you aren't involved in any way—and I have neither the reason nor the authority to hold you here. Just leave word where you can be found."

Most of the guests hurried to the stairs on their way up to pack their things.

"Go get your bag," Shayne told Tim Rourke. "I'll feel better about you when I get you out of this place and back to Miami."

Shayne himself went over to talk to Sam Hill.

"Have you really got any leads?" he asked the Sheriff.

"Nothing. I can take to a grand jury for indictment and that's for sure," the sheriff told him. "You know how it is late at night at a party like this. Everybody half drunk and wandering all over the place. Half the wives with the wrong husbands, and nobody really interested in anything except their own private bash. Nobody I've talked to has really had anything to say that they could testify to in court."

"I know," Shayne said. "I just

wondered if you had even a list of possibles."

"Oh, I've got plenty of possibles," Hill said. "And after talking to Sally Peters just now, it looks like everybody's a possible—but everybody. Even your pal Rourke was seen coming back from the direction of the boathouse way late at night."

"Tim?" Mike Shayne laughed. "Probably just went down to spit in the ocean. Who saw him anyway?"

"That's the funny part," Hill said. "It was one of my other possibles. Slim Peters, no less."

"Slim, eh. Why do you call him a possible? Because his wife is in for a slice of the estate? Or didn't you know?"

"I knew. Both of them told me that. What they didn't tell me, though—but I already knew—is that Slim's casinos down in the islands are in a real bind of some sort. He's in need of money right now. Lots and lots of money. Either the syndicate is fighting him or has cut itself in for most of the take. I don't know for sure—but I did hear that the real reason Slim and Sally came to this party was to try and promote a stake out of old Harvey."

WHEN TIM Rourke left Shayne talking to the sheriff, the lanky newsman went



straight up to his room where his bag was already packed and waiting for him.

He pushed the door open and stepped into the room.

A second later he felt the icy cold ring of a revolver muzzle touching his neck right at the top of the spine. Someone had been standing flat against the wall next to the door where he wouldn't be seen by anyone walking in.

That someone kept the gun against Tim Rourke's head and closed the door.

"Don't turn around," said a muffled and obviously disguised voice. "Don't turn and don't yell. Just listen."

Tim Rourke stood as rigidly quiet as he could. "I don't think you're going to shoot me," he said. "This place is crawling with cops."

"They wouldn't hear a shot through the door," the muffled voice said, "and I'd be out of

this place before you're found. So don't count on my not shooting. I'd rather than not."

"Mike Shayne knows what I know," Rourke said. He meant that if he was killed the secret knowledge of the killer that he was supposed to have wouldn't die with him.

The gamble paid off.

"That's what I thought," the voice said. "Now listen. I can pay two hundred thousand dollars for your silence. That's all I can raise. You and Shayne go back to Miami to your apartment and wait there. I'll contact you tonight and set up the pay-off. No cops. If you talk to anyone before then or try anything funny I swear I'll kill both of you before they get me."

The muzzle of the gun came away from Rourke's neck. A second later the butt of the gun crashed into his temple from behind. He went face down on the carpet and the world about him blacked out.

MIKE SHAYNE found his friend there on the floor ten minutes later and the big man silently cursed himself for being so careless as to let Rourke go up to the room by himself.

When a fast application of cold water from the bathroom tap brought Tim Rourke around so that he could sit up on the floor and then in a chair

and demand a glass of brandy, Shayne knew that no real damage had been done.

"Who was it?" he demanded then.

"He was behind me all the time," Tim Rourke explained. "I never even got a look at him. Anyway I think from the way his voice sounded that he probably had either a mask or a stocking over his head. And no, I didn't recognize the voice."

"You keep saying 'he'," the big detective said.

"That's right, I did. Funny. I suppose it might have been a woman disguising her voice, but I just don't think so. It was a man, Mike. Don't ask me why I'm so dead sure."

Mike Shayne wasn't that sure, but he listened while his friend went on to tell what the man had said, and repeated the offer of the two hundred thousand dollars.

"That's a lot of money to offer in such a hurry," Rourke said. "Particularly when I've really got nothing at all to sell. I may have seen the killing, but I sure didn't recognize the killer. He didn't even ask me that. I'd have told him fast enough if I had the chance."

"I don't think you could have convinced him no matter how hard you tried."

"I know that, Mike, but I'd have liked a crack at it any-

way. He was in an awful hurry to give away that two hundred grand though."

"That's what he wanted us to think," Mike Shayne said. "I don't think that whoever it is is about pass out that much cash. But if he's trying to trap us, maybe we can use it to our advantage. I'd like to try it Rourke—if you don't mind joining me as bait."

Rourke grimaced. "Well, I seem to be bait anyway. Might as well go along for the ride."

On their way out of the big house they encountered Della Peckinbaugh at the front door. She was looking regal and widowed at one time in a three thousand dollar Paris "creation" in black linen and pearls. Three servants were busy carrying bags out to the long black Rolls which waited, complete with chauffeur by the steps.

Sam Hill was with Mrs. Peckinbaugh, but he broke off his conversation to greet the two friends. "You boys on your way back to Miami?"

"That's right," Shayne greeted the Sheriff and Mrs. Peckinbaugh. "I figure if you haven't found anything down here, then I won't either."

"I take that as a compliment—coming from you," Sheriff Hill said. "Anyway there won't be much action here after another hour. It

looks like everybody's, clearing out all at once."

"I see you're going too, Della," Rourke said to the widow. "Are you headed back to your home in the west?"

"Not right away, Tim," she said. "Naturally I want to stay in touch with Sheriff Hill here until he finishes his investigation. After what happened the other night this place gives me the chills, so I'm going to Miami for a little while. The Peterses and Miss Dawn will be in Miami too. We have to have at least one business conference before we all separate."

Shayne looked surprised.

"Bill Buzby insists on it," Della Peckinbaugh explained. "We're all in Harvey's will you know, one way or the other. He says we should talk things over amicably instead of letting the lawyers mess it up. Besides, I think he wants me to authorize some sort of advance payment to Slim Peters."

"That's interesting," Shayne said.

"Oh yes," Della continued, "I suppose you know by now that's the big reason Slim and Sally came to this party. They wanted to talk some sort of business deal with Harvey. Now I suppose it will be with me instead. Whatever it is, I think I'll probably agree. I've always liked Slim."

Shayne noticed that she didn't say Sally or even Slim and Sally.

Della followed Shayne and Rourke partway down the steps. "Remember, Mr. Shayne," she said in a low voice that Sam Hill couldn't overhear, "you're still working for me. I'll contact you as soon as I get settled in Miami."

### VIII

TIM ROURKE and Mike Shayne drove straight on up the stretch of U.S. Highway One known as the overseas highway to the tip of mainland Florida and then on through an endless wall of bars, restaurants, car sales lots, realty offices and advertising signs to Miami itself.

Shayne stopped first at his apartment hotel near the mouth of the Miami River to leave his bag and pick up a few things he needed. Then he drove them on to Tim Rourke's high rise condominium.

Unlike his detective friend, who hadn't changed his address in years, Rourke lived in the most flashy and extravagant of the lofty new buildings that had gone towering up on the near-in northeast side of the central city.

The place had everything, including an oversized swim pool and a boat dock and turning

basin for nautically minded tenants, of whom Tim Rourke was not one.

The apartment also had a wide, railed balcony looking east over Biscayne Bay to the shining white towers of Miami Beach. It was here that the two friends took their tall, cold drinks and sat down for a talk while they waited for the killer to contact them with a repetition of his offer.

It was already past mid-afternoon, and the blazing Florida sun had passed over the building to the west. They sat in shade and a cool breeze blew in from the Atlantic and across the shining waters of the Bay.

"I suppose we just wait now," Tim Rourke said over his drink.

"That's the ticket," Shayne said, "Whoever he is, he's done us a favor. Instead of our having to chase all over Dade County looking for him—he's promised to come to us."

"Why would he do a fool thing like that?" Rourke asked. "If we had to look for him it's a thousand to one he'd be perfectly safe. We don't even know who we're supposed to be looking for, let alone where to start."

"He doesn't know that," Shayne said. "In fact he's sure we do know who he is. If he wasn't so scared by that



thought he'd be a lot smarter. He can't be smart while he's frightened. That's the trouble with murder, Tim. You and I've seen it a thousand times. As soon as a man kills he starts being afraid. Then he starts acting like a fool and keeps it up till sooner or later the murder catches up to him. It's just a matter of time, and that's what gives somebody like me the edge."

"I suppose when he does call what we do depends on what sort of a proposition he has."

"That's it."

The two men watched the Bay and nursed their drinks and waited.

The call they were waiting for came along about dinner time when the sun was well down towards the western horizon. Tim Rourke answered the phone as soon as it rang.

"Rourke?" the voice said. "You get off the phone and let me talk to Mike Shayne."

"Shayne here," the big man said a moment later.

"You listen real close," the voice said. Shayne didn't recognize it. "You listen real close. Real close. I'm only going to say this once. Get it or you won't hear it again."

"I understand."

"Make sure you do. Both of you go down to the boat dock that goes with Rourke's build-



ing. In the number ten slot on the dock you'll find a runabout tied up. The Dolly. She's all gassed up and ready to go. One of you know how to handle the boat?"

"We both do," Shayne said.

"Okay. Take her out and go right on north. You're heading for the yacht marina on the south side of seventy ninth Street Causeway just before the draw-bridge.

"About an eighth of a mile due south of the marina and west of the channel you'll see an anchored yacht. It's a seventy footer, painted white. It'll have an old outboard skiff tied to the stern. Tie your own boat to the stern beside the skiff. Go on board the yacht. I'll meet you in the main cabin with the money. Do you get that?"



"I get it," Shayne said flatly.

"Get started then and no tricks—no guns—no police."

That was all. The phone went dead.

Shayne and Tim Rourke found the sleek sports runabout, Dolly, tied up where the voice on the phone had said it would be.

Mike Shayne questioned the dock attendant, but the man denied knowing anything at all about the Dolly.

"I never saw that boat before in my life. All I know is it wasn't tied up here last night or this morning. Somebody must have brought it in when I was off having supper earlier and then just gone off and left it."

That would have been easy enough to do.

The keys were in the boat's ignition as had been promised, and Shayne had no trouble casting off the lines and backing her out the short approach channel to the deeper waters of Biscayne Bay.

"This tub is named the Dolly," Rourke said when they were under way. "Do you think maybe it could belong to Peters?"

"I'd make a big bet it doesn't," Shayne said with a laugh. "I think this was stolen earlier today, probably from the Dinner Key anchorage. Who-

ever took it probably had a good laugh at the name. Plenty of boats are called Dolly."

He turned the boat's bow to the north and opened up the throttle.

IT WAS only a short run, first to clear the midtown Julia Tuttle Causeway and then to head for the causeway marina to the north, but by the time they sighted their goal the sun was just about ready to set in the west.

The yacht was a big, diesel powered cruiser, painted white and with expensive mahogany trim. There was nothing except its location and the old outboard skiff at the stern to distinguish it from any one of hundreds of yachts that came into Biscayne Bay every year.

There was no one visible on deck, but the proper riding lights had been lit. There was also light in the wheelhouse and shining through the ports of the main cabin aft.

Shayne circled the yacht once and then pulled his runabout to the landing ladder which had been lowered on the starboard side of the yacht. This was the side furthest out in the Bay and shielded from the sight of anyone in the marina or any of the buildings lining the seventy ninth Street Causeway.

In spite of the instructions

received by phone, both Mike Shayne and Tim Rourke were armed. Rourke had a flat .380 Browning in his jacket pocket, and the big detective had his forty-five Colts automatic in a belt holster back of his right ship.

They both climbed the boarding ladder to the yacht's deck and waited.

Nobody stirred on board the yacht. Seconds dragged into minutes.

Finally the two men went into the wheelhouse. Like the decks, it was deserted.

Mike Shayne called down the stairwell to the main cabin. There was no answer. No one was stirring on the big yacht. Apparently even the crew had all gone ashore.

"Do you suppose he's hiding down below?" Rourke

"I don't think so," Shayne said. "Come along."

They went down the four steps into the main cabin aft. It was lit by a table lamp with three bulbs burning. The furnishings were luxurious, but here too there was no sign of anyone having been on board recently.

Even the ashtrays were clean and bare of any butts or other residue.

Shayne looked about carefully. The killer may have left a package or a bundle of money

or even a note. He couldn't find anything at all.

The big cabin was partly below and partly above the deck of the yacht. The part above was lined with windows which could be opened to give the passengers sun and air.

Suddenly one of the windows over the stern shattered with a crash. Glass fell into the cabin on the furnishings and carpet.

Tim Rourke jumped a foot. "My God, what was that?"

Mike Shayne yelled, "Get down, Tim. Flat on your face!" and went into action. He jumped across the cabin and pulled the lamp cord out of its socket to plunge them into darkness.

"What's going on?"

"Somebody took a shot at us through the glass," Shayne said. "I think he was either on shore or on another boat and using a rifle."

"He just tried again," Tim Rourke said.

He was right. They didn't hear the rifle shot, but they did distinctly hear a bullet strike the stern of the yacht. Then another whined into the water right off the stern.

Mike Shayne was up the hatch and out on deck with a speed that was extraordinary for such a big man. He left his gun in its holster, but pulled the big, three-inch-blade pocket

knife he always carried and got it open.

Even as he reached the stern, another bullet splashed white splinters from the thwart of the old skiff tied to the stern.

Mike Shayne slashed with his knife at the ancient rope with which the skiff was tied to the after rail. He cut through and the tide began to pull the skiff away from the yacht. As it drifted, Shayne ran back into the wheelhouse and threw himself flat on the deck inside.

Two more bullets hit the skiff as it drifted. Then, when it was a good fifty yards from the yacht, the distant marksman hit the target he'd been aiming at from the start. It was the innocent looking rusty five gallon gas can on the floor of the outboard skiff. The contents weren't gas. When the bullet hit, the can blew the skiff to toothpicks and showered the yacht with water and debris. The blast shook windows on the causeway.

As the crash died away, Rourke ran up into the wheelhouse. "That was supposed to be us," he yelled. "How did you ever know to cut that thing loose?"

"I almost didn't," Shayne said. "I knew it was crazy for him to shoot at us when we were down in the cabin. Once the light was out nobody but an

idiot would expect to hit you or me, but he kept on shooting.

"That meant it wasn't us he was shooting at. Then I remembered that outboard. It didn't belong with a luxury craft like this. When we came out I figured the killer had used it to board, but he wasn't on board. When the shot came, I guessed that it must have been left for a target. I decided to get rid of it. I guess it was none too soon."

"Let's get out of here."

"Let's not and pretend we did," Shayne said. "Anybody sharp enough to rig this trap is also sharp enough to figure we just might survive the bomb. He'll expect us to bolt in that case, and he'll be ready for it. You stay right where you are."

Shayne went out on deck and climbed down into the fast runabout, the Dolly. He started the engine, cast off the line, climbed back onto the yacht, and kicked the runabout clear of the larger boat.

The Dolly, its throttle wide open, started to roar away down the Bay.

The second runabout came in on a converging course to head it off. This one was painted black, and moved very fast. As it slid alongside the Dolly someone stood up for a second and tossed something inside, then cut wildly away.

The Dolly disintegrated in a fountain of flame and smoke.

## IX

"I TOLD YOU he'd have something up his sleeve," Mike Shayne said as they watched the wreck of the Dolly go down into the dark water. "Sort of a single track mind though. Bombs and again bombs."

"How are we going to get back to shore?"

"This boat is bound to have a ship-to-shore phone," Shayne said. "Even if it didn't, the Harbor Police will be closing in on the scene of two explosions that size. They'll take us ashore."

Tim Rourke had found a portable bar in the cabin, and the bar had a bottle of whiskey. He drank and passed the bottle over to big Mike Shayne.

"Our friend is a mixture of smart and dumb," Shayne said as he wiped his mouth with the back of one big hand.

"How do you figure that?"

"Oh come off it, Tim," Shayne said. "You can figure that as well as I can. You tell me."

"Well, he was smart enough to know he couldn't buy off the pair of us. Maybe he knew your reputation for honesty. If he knew that much, he could also figure we couldn't resist the



temptation to come out to this yacht. He knew if he couldn't buy us, he had to kill us. On top of that he was smart enough to rig the bomb in the skiff. I suppose he figured he could explode it at long distance by rifle fire and run no risk from us. The bomb would have blown us up and sunk this yacht."

"He misjudged the difficulty of hitting that mark with a rifle in fading light, shooting over water," Shayne said. "That isn't easy. He must be a crack shot or a rank amateur to even try it, and my vote goes for the expert. It was still a fool thing to try. Success depended on his making it with the first shot. That was dumb."

"Maybe it was," Rourke said, "but he was still sharp enough to close in and bomb our escape craft."

"That wasn't so smart, either," the big detective said. "If I had really been on the Dolly, when he closed in, I'd have had my gun with me. When he stood up to toss that bomb, I could have shot his head off, and would have."

They heard a motor then and saw the lights of the Harbor Patrol boat bearing down.

"Okay, okay," Rourke said. "What would you have done in his place?"

"If I'd been stuck with this caper," Shayne said and laughed, "I'd have set the yacht here as bait. Then when we were coming up the Bay in Dolly, innocent as babes, I'd have come close in that black speedster of his and tossed my bomb. Before we got near the yacht. That's when we were off guard and he could have got away with it. That's what a real smart man would have done."

An hour and a half later the two friends were in the oak panelled office of Miami Police Chief Will Gentry. The Chief, an old friend of both Shayne and Rourke, had had a car waiting at the dock when the Harbor Patrol brought them in.

He had glasses and a bottle of Mike Shayne's favorite French brandy on his big mahogany desk, and a box of the long, black, Havana type

cigars for which he was famous.

"Someday you're going to stretch your luck too far," he said to the redhead. "Everytime you show up in the middle of a case I ask myself is this the time. One of these days the answer is going to have to be yes."

"Not this time, Will," Shayne said. "Not this time. By the way who owns that big yacht we were on? The estate of the late Harvey P.?"

"Not quite," Gentry replied. "In a couple more days it would have been. The owner was trying to sell it to Peckinbaugh for a red hot price."

"Oh? What owner?"

"The boat is registered in the name of Slim Peters, Mike. He's been using it as a floating home down in the islands."

"Slim Peters!" Tim Rourke exploded. "So he's the one."

"You're jumping to conclusions again," Shayne said.

"I don't know about that," Rourke protested. "Slim needed money, lots of it, and needed it bad. Sally's stake in old Harvey's will gets him out of that hole. He owns the boat so he can use it to trap us. He's from the West so he has to have used a rifle before. It was a man who stood up in that cruiser and tossed the bomb into the Dolly. What more do we need?"

"We need evidence that would stand up in court," Mike Shayne said over his brandy and cigar. "Look at it this way. We know Sally Peters is into the will for ten million. That's a lot of course, but Slim Peters is running a big gambling chain with at least six casinos, and maybe more not in his own name. In a setup like that, ten million dollars is a drop in the bucket."

"That's right," Chief Gentry said. "If Slim really is in trouble either with the syndicate or the island governments, he could need a lot more than ten million."

"Sure," Shayne said. "Old Harvey alive and maybe willing to back him with a really big bag of money, could have been worth a lot more to Slim. He'd want to keep him alive, not kill him."

"But suppose Harvey had already turned down the idea of staking Slim," Gentry said. "We don't know that he didn't."

"We don't know that he did either," Shayne said. "Of course if that was so, the ten million would look better than nothing. But I think Slim's the frugal type. He wouldn't want to waste his own yacht."

"The crew was ashore," Gentry said. "They say Slim phoned and told them to take the night off. On the other

hand the man who took the call can't swear it was Slim's voice. It sounded like him. . . . So where does that leave us all? With one dead millionaire and three red headed women for suspects is where?"

"Correction," Mike Shayne said. "For suspects we have three beautiful redheads, Slim Peters, and everybody else who was on Key Paradiso the night old Harvey Peckinbaugh died."

"This is in my jurisdiction since they all came up here," Chief Gentry said. "I'm going to have my boys look into this. I'll have a tail on Slim and Sally Peters too. He won't be throwing any bombs now for sure." Gentry shifted his cigar.

"I'm not satisfied he was the one," Shayne said again. "Maybe, maybe not. We can't even be sure it was a man threw that bomb. Could have been a woman in man's clothes—or a goon hired for the one hit. By then it was pretty well dark."

"What are you going to do then?"

"Della Peckinbaugh said she was going to set up a 'family' conference," Shayne said. "That will be sometime tomorrow. Since I'm supposed to be working for her, I'll invite myself in. By that time I think I'll know enough to expose the killer."

That was all he would say.

## X

MIKE SHAYNE spent the rest of the night in Tim Rourke's apartment. Not only did he want to be there in case another attack was made on his lanky friend, but there was also a chance that the killer might make another attempt to contact the ace writer by phone.

"Sooner or later he'll have to call or kill," Shayne said. "He can't just sit and wait to see what we do. Not as long as he thinks you really do know his identity, he can't."

"I don't envy his frame of mind right now," Rourke agreed. "He must be pretty sure we escaped both his bombs. After that the natural thing would be for us to spill our guts to the cops. He must be wondering if there's already a warrant out for him."

"On the other hand he won't dare break and run for it," Shayne said, "for two reasons. In the first place that would be a dead giveaway. Anybody innocent right now has got to stick around. In the second place, if he runs. . . ."

"Don't you mean if she runs?"

"Maybe so. Maybe not. Anyway it's easiest just to say he. If he runs he loses whatever it was he killed for. That is, he does if it was money that was

the motive. Of course if it was hate or jealousy. . . . ."

"That's an interesting word, jealousy," Tim Rourke said. "How come you suddenly start using it? Of course all three of the beautiful redheads have some reason to be jealous of each other."

"So they do," Mike Shayne agreed and tugged his ear lobe with one thumb and forefinger. "That wasn't exactly what I had in mind though. I suppose it's the idea of motive that bugs me most in this case. All three women stand to get a lot of money by the murder, but not exactly the sort that makes for murder. Della gets the most of course, but she'd get it anyway. They'd all get it anyway. Nobody has to kill."

"Dolly Dawn might lose hers if Harvey cooled off on her and changed his will," Rourke pointed out.

"Harvey was a long way from cooling off on that one," Shayne said. "Remember she was the only girl friend that actually got in the will without marrying him. No, I'm just not satisfied. There has to be another motive, or somebody else with a motive."

"Maybe one of the men close to Harvey," Rourke said. "Maybe even Buzby, though I don't think so. What would he have to gain? As far as we



know he's not in the will, and besides he's been like a member of the family for the last five years since Della married Peckinbaugh. He should be loyal to his boss if anyone in the world was. How about the servants?"

"If it was the servants, Sam Hill would have smelled it out. Sam's no fool."

"What are we going to do then?"

"First of all I'm going to try to make sure nobody gets close to you with another bomb. Then I'll give the killer a chance to give himself away. Killers are like cats on a hot tin roof, Tim. They can't sit still, and anything they do, anything at all, has a tendency to give them away. I want this one to make another move."

The night wore on, and the two friends took turns getting some sleep. Nothing untoward happened.

In the morning Tim Rourke phoned down to the condominium restaurant and had hot breakfasts sent up.

About nine o'clock nothing had happened and Mike Shayne was getting restless. He and Tim Rourke went on down to Shayne's second floor Flagler Street office. Lucy Hamilton was already there.

Shayne called Will Gentry and learned that Della Peckin-

baugh had a suite of rooms in the largest and most expensive of Boulevard hotels facing Miami's Bayfront Park.

"The hotel's part of the Peckinbaugh estate, so she moved right in," Gentry said. "In case it matters to you, we have the place staked out."

He also gave the addresses of the less pretentious hotels where Dolly Dawn and the Peters had taken rooms.

"Harvey's confidential man Buzby is in the same hotel as the widow," he added. "He and a couple of secretaries and lawyers who flew in from the west have rooms four flights down from Della's suite. Incidentally, we found the guy who owned the Dolly. He wants to sue you for causing the destruction of his boat."

"Just what I needed," Shayne said. "Tell him to sue the thief."

"We already did," Gentry said. "What are you up to, Mike?"

"I don't know," Shayne said and hung up. That wasn't exactly the truth.

He put through another phone call to Della Peckinbaugh.

"It's important that I see you this morning, Mrs. Peckinbaugh," he said. "I think I know who killed your husband, but I'm going to have to have



your cooperation to prove it."

"Oh thank God you're alright, Mike Shayne," she said. "I was afraid you'd been injured last night. Of course you can have all the help and cooperation I can possibly give you. Just tell me what I can do."

"I'll have to see you in person," he said. "I've got a long standing rule not to trust phones with the really important conversations. Can I come to the hotel?"

"Of course you can. I just woke up though and I'll have to bathe and dress and have some breakfast. Suppose you come at twelve noon. I'll be expecting you then."

Shayne said: "Fine. I'll be there." and hung up.

Tim Rourke looked at him across the desk with a quizzical expression. "So you think you know who killed her husband?" he said. "Come on, boy, and let me in on the secret. Don't forget he's trying to kill me too."

"And me," Shayne said. "I wish I really did know, but I'm afraid that was mostly bluff for the beautiful widow's benefit."

He picked up a copy of the *Miami Daily News* which Lucy Hamilton had put on his desk. "I see our little bombing spree didn't hit the front page."

"It's on page two of section B," Lucy told him. "Will Gentry

didn't give out much to the reporters. Just a couple of mystery explosions in North Bay. The police are looking into it. That sort of thing. A couple of the teevy stations didn't even use the item at all."

"He didn't give out our names?"

"I suppose he thought you didn't want the publicity," Lucy said. "Frankly I'm glad. Let the bomber worry about what happened to you."

"That's funny," Shayne said. "The widow P. was afraid I'd been hurt last night."

"She must know more than she's supposed to then," Rourke said. "That's obvious."

"It is. What I'd like to know is how she found out about danger to me."

The phone rang again. This time it was the gentle voice of Dolly Dawn.

"Mr. Shayne? I thought you'd be interested to know that Della Peckinbaugh has invited us all to a meeting in her hotel suite this evening. Something about both the murder and the estate. Do you think you could possibly arrange to be there? Anyway I feel you should know about it."

"I'm going to arrange to be there," Shayne said. "Thank you for calling anyway."

"Don't thank me. I know you were working on the matter of

poor Harvey's death. I want his killer brought to justice too, you know."

"I appreciate that," Shayne said.

Dolly Dawn hesitated for a moment. "I don't know if I should mention this. I didn't see anything in the papers. . . . but I think I ought to say there's a rumor that someone tried to kill you and Mr. Rourke last night. I hope you're both alright."

"We are," Shayne told her. "Whoever it was bungled badly. I'm interested in how you heard about it. Can you tell me?"

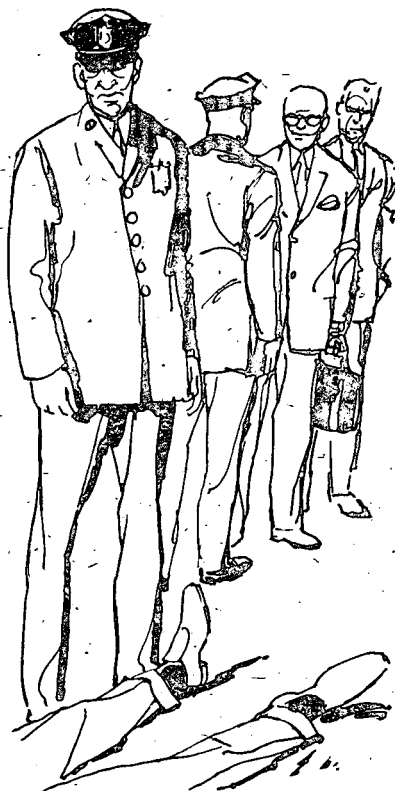
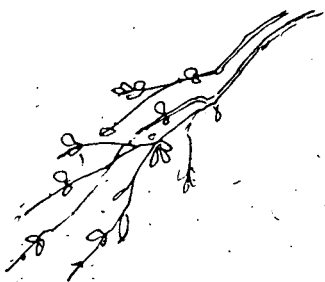
"Of course I can. The Peters are staying at the same hotel I am and we had breakfast together in the coffee shop. Slim told me he'd heard a rumor about it. Well, I hope I see you at the meeting tonight."

Shayne put the phone down.

"Tim," he said. "It looks like our little ruckus last night is about as secret as this morning's weather report."

The hotel where Della Peckinbaugh had her suite was just a couple of blocks up Biscayne Boulevard from the intersection of Flagler Street, so Mike Shayne decided to walk over at noon.

Since the hotel was a part of the Peckinbaugh real estate holdings, the family always used the top floor penthouse



when they were in town. Only one of the elevators went all the way up, but it also made stops at all the other floors. Like the rest of the bank it was of the self service type and the riders pushed buttons for their floors.

Shayne got on in the lobby. When the elevator stopped to pick up a passenger on the mezzanine he had a good view of the entrance to the bar on the other side of the balcony. A man and woman with their backs to him were going into the bar. Shayne thought he recognized the man as Bill Buzby. The woman was a red-head. She was ahead of the man and he got only a fleeting glimpse of her, but he thought he recognized Sally Peters. Then the elevator door closed and his view was cut off.

The penthouse had its own private lobby. Shayne got out of the elevator and rang the bell to the apartment door and a uniformed personal maid let him in.

"Mrs. Peckinbaugh is just finishing dressing," she told the detective. "She says will you please wait in the living room."

Shayne complied. The room was beautifully furnished and had a huge picture window looking out over Biscayne Boulevard to Bayfront Park and then across the Bay to

the coast of Miami Beach.

It was fully ten minutes before Della Peckinbaugh appeared. She was wearing a chic and expensive linen slack suit and a necklace of magnificent matched pearls. Nothing about her appearance suggested a bereaved widow.

"It's a beautiful morning," she smiled at Mike Shayne. "I just couldn't stand the idea of wearing black."

"I understand."

"But that wasn't what you came to talk about, Mr. Shayne. Do I understand that you have evidence to show who murdered my husband?"

"I have evidence that's just about good enough to convince me," Mike Shayne said. "I'm afraid it's not enough yet to take to a jury, but I'm pretty sure I can get that within another twenty-four hours. With your help, that is."

"Splendid," she said. "Now I believe you're as good as they told me you were. Who do you suspect and how can I help?"

"You can help by inviting me to your conference this evening and letting me bring Tim Rourke and Chief Gentry of the Miami Police as guests. By that time I think I can name the killer."

"Consider it done," Della Peckinbaugh said. "You know I'll do anything you ask. Can't

you tell me who it is though?" You know you can rely on my discretion."

"I know I can," the big man said gravely. "But I'd rather not accuse anyone till I have a few more facts. I haven't told anyone yet, and I won't till I'm absolutely sure."

"Excuse me a moment," she said then. "I think the private phone in my bedroom is ringing."

She was gone only a few moments. "Sorry," she said on returning. "It was my hairdresser making an appointment for tomorrow. Now, what else can I do to help?"

"Just a couple of questions," the big man said. "Is there anyone outside of those I've met who could have a real interest in your husband's will? Any other heirs?"

"As far as family is concerned there are only distant cousins," she replied. "My understanding is they are provided for by generous personal bequests and by income from a family trust. None of them would have gained anything by murder. Then there are large bequests to three charities, but of course they wouldn't. . ."

"Of course not," Shayne agreed. "Just one more thing. Could anyone but you or your husband draw on your bank accounts?"

"Only Bill Buzby," she said, "but one of us had to add a second signature to any check he wrote."

Shayne excused himself then after promising to be at the meeting that evening.

Della Peckinbaugh went with him to the foyer and waited until the elevator arrived. It was empty. Shayne said a last goodby and stepped in. The heavy metal doors slid shut.

There was a movement—a bare flicker of movement caught by the corner of his eye. He couldn't pin it down. Just a movement where there should have been no movement at all.

Another man wouldn't have noticed it, or would have hesitated and died. Mike Shayne had the keen, instant reflex of a big jungle cat. He jumped by instinct to flatten himself against the wall of the elevator cage, even as his right hand flashed to draw the big Colt's forty-five.

By the sound, the gun was a thirty-eight. The shot came from above his head and the bullet struck the floor below where his head had been just a split second before.

By the time Shayne managed to look up, the metal panel in the roof of the elevator cage, placed there so passengers would have an emergency escape hatch, had slammed shut.

There was a quick scrape of feet on the roof and then silence.

Shayne jumped for the escape hatch, but it was wedged shut from above.

He knew that this was the top of the elevator shaft. There would be a balcony and exits both to the roof and to a stairwell alongside the elevator shaft. Both were provided for the convenience of maintenance and repair men.

By the time Shayne could get into the shaft the killer would have made an easy escape either down the stairs or out across the roof.

Instead of wasting time on futile pursuit, the big man dug the bullet that had been fired at him out from under the thick carpeting. The slug had flattened out of shape on the metal flooring. He dropped it in his pocket and then pushed the button for the lobby floor.

Once safely down Shayne took a lounge chair in the lobby where he could watch the elevator bank and stairs. About twenty minutes later Slim and Sally Peters came down the stairs from the mezzanine where the bar was located. They were laughing and talking.

Shortly afterwards Shayne got up and walked back to his office. He spent the next couple of hours on the phone, long dis-

tance, to newspaper offices, banks and stock brokers in Harvey Peckinbaugh's home town in the west. Tim Rourke was also busy talking to friends and news sources in the financial community of Miami.

## XI

AT NINE o'clock the same evening Mike Shayne, Tim Rourke and Police Chief Will Gentry were in the lobby of the hotel where Della Peckinbaugh was staying waiting for the elevator to the penthouse apartment. From a distance they had watched Dolly Dawn take the elevator, followed shortly afterwards by the Peters.

"I hope you know what you're doing, Mike," the Chief was saying.

"I've got this place staked out just like you said. You know that's all I can do. Without some evidence I can't even get a search warrant, let alone arrest anybody."

"I think I can show you some evidence within the next half hour," Mike Shayne said.

"I certainly hope you can. My boys haven't been able to turn up a thing so far, any more than Sam Hill has down at Key Paradiso."

"This isn't that sort of evidence," Shayne said. "This isn't

the sort that you can leave lying around for a cop to pick up, not even the best cop in the world. This evidence is what's inside the killer. He doesn't leave it lying around, but he can't hide or destroy it either. He has to carry it wherever he goes. In a few minutes I'm going to give him a chance to show it to us."

"All I can say is you'd better know what you're talking about," Chief Gentry said. "Well, come on. Let's go."

They found the group from the Key Paradiso party waiting in the luxurious, softly lighted living room of the hotel penthouse.

Della Peckinbaugh sat at the head of a carved mahogany library table. Her hair was beautifully coifed and she wore a midnight blue evening dress, which set off her superb figure to perfection, and a rope of sapphires and pearls around her neck. Bill Buzby, in a tuxedo, and two dignified men who were introduced as members of the late Harvey Peckinbaugh's legal staff were at the table with her.

Dolly Dawn sat in an upholstered wing chair over by the big picture window. She looked calm, aloof and faintly withdrawn from the whole affair.

Slim and Sally Peters were side by side on a big couch near

the library table. Slim wore a white linen suit and a black bow tie. The jacket was loose enough to conceal a shoulder holster. Shayne couldn't tell if the lanky gambler was wearing one. Sally was in a matching white linen pants suit. Her magnificent red hair was piled high on her head and fastened with a flaming pearl and diamond beret.

Chief Gentry and Tim Rourke sat on another sofa facing the Peterses. Mike Shayne went to the library table and took a chair at one end.

A servant served a round of drinks in which no one seemed particularly interested.

"I'll get right to the point," Della Peckinbaugh said then in a cool and incisive tone. "You all know Mr. Mike Shayne. I think you know who he is and why I've asked him to be here tonight. I hired Mike Shayne to find the killer of my husband after it became apparent that the police were not doing so. This morning Mike told me that he had succeeded and would name that person tonight."

"Mike Shayne—you have the floor."

Apart from the two attorneys, the room exhibited the finest collection of inscrutable poker faces that Will Gentry had ever seen. No one said a

word or even stirred a finger.

"Mrs. Peckinbaugh is right," Shayne said after he had let the pause drag itself out until every nerve was tense. "I know who killed Harvey Peckinbaugh. I am going to name him tonight."

He paused again, took out a cigar, and proceeded to light and puff it slowly and carefully.

"My God, man," one of the attorneys said, "Why don't you cut out the theatrics. Name the killer."

Shayne kept silent almost a moment longer. "All in good time," he said. "First I think that all of you, and particularly the killer, are entitled to know how I came to my conclusions. You see, it was the killer in person who gave me the answers one by one. If he hadn't made one basic error and then compounded that error over and over, this crime might have gone forever unsolved, and the killer been perfectly safe."

"Tell us," Della Peckinbaugh said.

"Tim Rourke blundered onto the scene of the murder," Shayne said. "The killer saw and recognized Tim. His fatal mistake was that he thought Rourke also recognized him. Tim didn't. All he saw was a confused scuffle in darkness. He didn't even know he'd seen

a killing, let alone who the parties were."

Shayne looked from face to face. None of them changed expression in the slightest.

"The killer wasn't a professional," Shayne said. "If he or she had been, then Tim would never have left that shadowed grove by the sea alive. His body would have been put in the skiff along with Harvey Peckinbaugh's to sink into the Gulf Stream too."

"The killer was an amateur who would kill only for a personal reason. He didn't think fast enough or realistically enough. He let Tim walk away."

"That was his second mistake. His first and worst was to assume that Tim had recognized him. All the other mistakes grew out of that first one."

"Of course the killer didn't know Tim Rourke. Tim is a brave and honest man. If he had realized a murder had been taking place, he would have interfered even at the risk of his own life. If he had recognized the two people in the thicket, he would have gone to Sam Hill as soon as he knew that Harvey was murdered."

"The killer didn't even consider this. The killer thought that Rourke was a blackmailer, as he himself would have been. This in itself tells us a lot about the killer."



"He tried to buy Tim Rourke's silence. When that failed and he found out I was associated with the case, he tried to kill us both. He tried and failed more than once. Each time he did, he made more mistakes that pointed more and more clearly to his own identity.

"At first all of you here tonight were possible suspects, except for you gentlemen," Shayne turned to the lawyers, "because each of you had the opportunity and a possible motive to kill.

"By his actions the killer eliminated you one by one until the only suspect remaining was the right one."

Shayne's cigar had gone out. He took his time striking a match and relighting it. The tension in the room almost reached the breaking point.

"Miss Dawn was a suspect because she was in Harvey's will for a very large sum," Shayne said. "On the other hand she seems to have really been fond of him. She was too small and slight to have overcome him in a fight. She had nothing to gain by his death at this particular time. Most important of all, it has been established that she couldn't have tried to bomb Rourke and myself last night. At the time that happened she was eating din-

ner in a public place. You might say the killer cleared her himself by the time of the bombing.

"That yacht where we were to have been bombed belonged to Slim Peters. I don't think he would have planned to destroy it. It was worth a lot of money to Slim, and not insured against bombing. I talked to the insurance people today. In Slim's business they're careful what insurance they write.

"Besides, I think Slim would kill with a gun, not a bomb.

"Of course even Della Peckinbaugh could be a suspect. Her motive? To free herself from a man she found intolerable, a man who flaunted his mistresses before her, who treated her with scorn and whom she despised."

Della Peckinbaugh stirred in anger.

Shayne raised one big hand. "Hold on. You could have been a suspect. I'm not saying yet you are the killer. You had the most to lose by killing and to gain by waiting till Harvey died a natural death of anyone. If you killed him and were caught, you couldn't inherit one dime. Why risk that?

"Of course, I almost changed my mind this morning. When I came to see you here I had to wait ten minutes. I know now it's because it was you I saw in



the bar downstairs with Mr. Buzby. I had to wait while a servant got you back up here. The police will question your servants and find out which one."

"I wasn't with Bill," Della said. "He was having a drink with Sally Peters."

"She joined us," Sally said. "I left them together."

Shayne ignored the exchange. "After I told you I knew who the killer was you excused yourself for a moment. You said it was to answer the phone. I think it was to make a phone call. The person you called tried to kill me in the elevator when I left here, so he must have been close by. Maybe still in the bar."

Della Peckinbaugh's calm was really shattered by this time. "You're accusing me of conspiring with Bill Buzby to kill Harvey and then you! Mr. Shayne you're out of your mind. It's a tissue of lies. I had no reason on God's earth to do such a thing."

She started to rise, but Mike Shayne waved her back into her seat.

"Hold on there. I haven't accused you. I'm just stating some facts."

"I hired you to find my husband's murderer. I wouldn't want you killed."

"I thought of that," Shayne

said. "Only the real killer would. He had to be someone who knew the Key Paradiso home and boathouse intimately. He had to know this hotel and how to get into the elevator shaft. He had to know the financial affairs of all of you, and where Slim kept his yacht, and how to imitate Slim's voice on the phone to the crew. He had to be in the know on everything that happened, that is, be someone you would confide in at every stage. The only one that fits is Buzby."

The confidential man kept his poker face. "Your hypothetical killer also had to have a motive, Mr. Shayne. Of all these people I'm the only one without a motive."

"Oh no," Shayne said. "On the contrary—you're the only one of the lot with a motive strong enough to make you kill Harvey. That motive was fear."

He paused again, and they all watched him closely.

"Somebody offered Tim Rourke two hundred thousand dollars for silence. That's an odd amount. It should have been much less, or much more. Any of these women could have offered half a million at least, I thought to myself. The killer panicked. He offered all the money he had, or close to it. It was a mistake."

"I made some phone calls

today, Buzby. A month ago Harvey Peckinbaugh got suspicious. He ordered an audit of your accounts by a good detective agency. You have a quarter of a million dollars that you shouldn't have.

"We can check this. I think Harvey had a report that you had been embezzling from him and was going to send you to jail. That, or you had intercepted the report. You quarrelled and he threatened you, so you killed him.

"You might have gotten away with it, if Tim Rourke hadn't blundered by and you thought he had recognized you. That was a mistake, and so was everything you've done since."

Bill Buzby looked white and deadly calm, but he still managed to keep control. "Theories," he said. "Words, Mr. Shayne. Nothing but words. You have no proof of anything. If you did, I'd be under arrest now."

He glared at the big detective.

Shayne looked at him gravely. "I've got proof."

He reached into his jacket pocket and took out a battered lump of metal and let it drop on the table. "This is the bullet you fired at me in the elevator today. This we can trace to the gun and the gun to you."

Chief Will Gentry and Tim

Rourke kept perfectly straight faces, though they knew this was pure bluff on the big redhead's part. No bullet mashed so badly by its impact on steel could be ballistically assigned to the gun that fired it.

Like most people Buzby didn't know this, but he still kept his control. "Trace away. I don't own a gun."

"You don't have to own one," Shayne said. "You fired one. Not twelve hours ago you fired a gun. There'll still be minute traces of burned powder in the skin of your hand even if you've washed that hand. The traces will be there for days. We're going to test the hands of everyone in this room for powder traces, Buzby. We've got you now."

Bill Buzby was faster than Shayne had counted on. He hadn't been fool enough to come to the meeting wearing a gun, but there was one in the drawer of the library table where he sat, and he got it out and shoved it to the back of Della Peckinbaugh's head before they could move.

"I'm leaving here, and she's going along as hostage," he said. "So much as blink an eye and I'll blow her head off. I mean it. You all stay here for two hours. Nobody moves or phones. At the end of that time

you can do as you please. I'll be gone in a private plane and Della with me. I'll let her go when I've made Cuba. Do you understand?"

He didn't wait for an answer. Keeping Della as a shield he backed across the room and through the kitchen door into the hands of the two detectives. Chief Will Gentry had posted there before the meeting started.

"COULD YOU really have found powder residue on his hands?" Della Peckinbaugh asked the men over drinks when Buzby had been taken away.

"No way to tell without trying," Chief Gentry said. "It's possible, but we couldn't know

for sure. The important thing is that Buzby thought we could. He didn't dare test it."

"Everything he did was a mistake," she said. "Poor Bill."

"He was a killer and a fool. The two go together," Mike Shayne said. "His first mistake was when he stole a dollar from your husband. Everything came from that. At the end everything he did showed me more and more clearly who he had to be. The only real evidence was his own guilt. It had to come out and it did."

"If I hadn't blundered onto the killing, he'd have had a perfect crime," Tim Rourke said.

"There's no such thing," Mike Shayne told them all.

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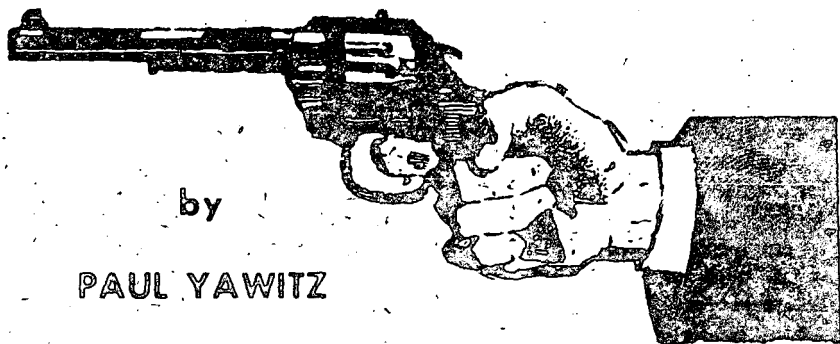
**In The Next Issue—Exclusively Yours—**

## **A PERFECT WOMAN TO MURDER**

*The New MIKE SHAYNE Short Novel*

**by BRETT HALLIDAY**

*The woman hung grotesquely from the shower nozzle by a noose made from her own silk stockings. The nearest suspect was the man who had hired Shayne to investigate! It was a case Shayne hadn't wanted to take, and the more he learned, the less he liked it...*



by

PAUL YAWITZ

## AWRY IN A PARADE

*Everyone marches to a different tune, and he knew  
just the song to make whittie march his way at last!*

VIGAL KNEW there was no re-treating now.

He was in the fermenting midst of his long-planned hold-up of the rich neighborhood branch of Newcomers National Bank.

An unexpected anxiety clamped his throat as he hurled his slender, agile body over the outer counter of the main office. For days he had steeled his every nerve for the climactic moment. He had been certain they would not waver. It was a prudently devised maneuver to free himself from the gutter of his black ghetto. His own little masterpiece that

once accomplished would allow him to walk with equality. Big money was his secret.

Nothing could go wrong, he had assured himself a thousand times. For three weeks he had cased the operation of the bank. It was to be—had to be—a perfect crime executed with a precision that would prove him a pro.

It was a dangerous venture and in a few hectic, but carefully devised, moments it would be over.

In that sliver of a second that he was now suspended in the mid-air leap, the light .22 caliber Smith & Wesson in his

free hand felt heavier than he had ever suspected, but his eyes caught the red glove of the hand on which his body was weighted and it renewed his confidence. It was part of the protection he had planned for himself. No one would ever detect his fingerprints, no one. The anxiety relaxed, and his mind attuned itself instantly to the well rehearsed minutes ahead.

There were fourteen employees inside the modest quarters. All were on their backs trembling against the floor and watching his leap. Their minds were so blank with fright that not one even wanted him to slip. If he fell someone would be expected to struggle with him. It was a duty the \$115-a-week guard was loath to face. He was rooting for the oddly attired stick-up man to get a million, if necessary, and to get out.

Vigal had attired himself with purposeful outrageousness. His hat was an over-puffed, knitted, red stocking flap. He wore a droopy turtle-necked sweater with long sleeves floridly brilliant in contrasting stripes, and his wide, checkered slacks clung to his ankles with heavy elastics. His shoes were green and lustrous, and there was a small drum tucked with its sticks by a nar-

row strap over his shoulders. It was a wild costume that dis-furnished the mind, but the weapon gripped tightly in his hand was a silencing menace that was respected by the white Establishment.

In the maze of colors his face became an anonymous blob. It was part of his plan. Who could ever correctly describe him after he escaped?

At 8:00 he had slipped out of an alley and jammed his gun into the bank guard's back. "You belong to me, man," he whispered and slashed the officer's weapon from its holster. "Open the door!"

Once inside, Vigal supervised with dispatch all the normal activities that would throw off suspicion. The venetians were thrust partially open, the fluorescent tubes over the tellers' cages were lighted, and the guard was ordered to make his pacifying call to the bank patrol office. "It's 8:07. Everything's in order here—"

For a moment he had hoped to voice the distress signal which was "Okay," but Vigal knew the routine too well. He tapped the man's head with the nozzle of his gun. "Say, Maynard," he ordered.

"Maynard," the guard spouted and dropped the receiver into its cradle.

The manager was admitted

and locked in at 8:30. He and the guard were immediately supplied with wooden pegs Vigal carried in his drum. They were fashioned to fit the alarm releases on the floors. Vigal had spent a week carving the preventatives. "One stupid finger slip and both of you die," he barked, and the pegs slid into perfect permanent position.

Each phone wire was severed at the wall, and the scanning cameras hidden in niches at both ends of the lounge were disconnected and their slugs crushed with a hammer.

"You seem to know where everything is," the manager said dourly.

"Even the two hundred \$1000 bills that are waiting for pick-up in your vault," Vigal agreed. "And you're going to help me leave with them."

Then, with his gun holding command, Vigal extracted four slim cannisters from his drum. "Now listen, if you want to live. These were taken from an Army dump ship that buried thousands of them in the South Pacific. Don't worry how I got them, but I'm giving them to you. Then you can worry—real good because they contain a death gas that kills everything within 500 feet in less than two seconds. Two seconds, get that? Once they're open, that becomes it, man." He laughed



with a sinister threatening sound.

"There's a short-wave release on each can, and I can control it up to a mile from this room." He pulled out a diminutive electronic device for its macabre effect. "I know I can trust you and your cashier to open the big safe with your counter-keys. Get me?"

The manager, rigid and tense, nodded affirmatively and shuddered as Vigal carefully placed his bombs on a desk. It was exactly 9:00 now and the cashier arrived. His morning jauntiness was shocked from his face as the manager hustled him downstairs into the vault zone.

The remaining employees were captured at the door as each appeared, and Vigal's gun silenced them into flat immobility on the carpets. "I'm taking off the minute they come up with my money. Then you'll all take your places as if nothing's happened. Remember, I'll be in charge here long after I'm gone."

It was 9:46 when Vigal completed his leap across the counter. He breathed hard as he stuffed the cash into his drum. When he locked the door from the outside, everyone proceeded to his position like a robot.

Vigal walked slowly into the alley, then broke into a run for the two blocks to Market St.

where the parade of the Black Compton Clowns for Racial Justice was passing on schedule. He lowered his drum in front of him and sidled in with the wide flank formation of drummers. Each was in a costume identical with his. He sighed. His job was done.

His security suddenly shattered when he realized the drummers were all white men. "Where's our black corps?" he asked the man beside him.

"They're on a plane to Washington. Duke Ellington hired 'em this morning for a special show at the White House."

Vigal went limp as he saw police cars merging on the procession.

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# Pit of Fear

by CLAYTON MATTHEWS

*"Dead men rise up never?" That's what the poem said. But my pal in the casket did just that every day—until the last day...*

THE MAN in the casket had none of the waxy pallor of death. There was color in his cheeks, the color of life. But his eyes were closed, the long-fingered hands folded peacefully across his chest. And the fluted, beak-like nostrils showed no signs of breathing.

A man and a woman stood looking down at the casket. They hadn't seen me come in. It was late, after midnight, and the big carnival tent was empty except for the three of us. They were arguing about something as I stopped behind them. Their voices, even in contention, had a hushed, sepulchral quality in the big tent.

The woman said in a tense whisper, "Gil, I can't! Carl will have to come out any minute, and he's always angry if I'm not here."

"You'd think I was asking you out on a date," Gil Holt said bitterly, "instead of going to the cook tent for a lousy cup of coffee!"

Linda Mercer said, "But don't you see, to Carl it's the same thing!"

"No, I don't see. All I can see is a beautiful broad married to a man twice her age!"

I cleared my throat loudly, and the pair spun around guiltily.

Gil Holt said, "Patch! We didn't hear you come in."

"Sorry, I didn't mean to sneak up on you." I nodded toward the man in the casket. "Carl all right?"

"Sure, he's fine." Holt's glance swung toward the casket, and he took a step back. "Look, he's watching us!"

The grave, if such it could be



called, occupied a position of prominence in the sideshow tent, isolated by several feet from one end of the long platform running down the center. The area around the grave was chained off; a section of striped

canvas hung from the chain, dragging the ground like a woman's long skirt.

Actually the grave was little more than a rectangular pit, dug before the first performance of each new carnival date. The

bottom two-thirds of the casket was covered with dirt, packed in tightly and mounded on top. The upper third was clear glass. It was set on a slight slant, giving the spectators on the entrance side of the pit an unobstructed view of the man inside. A heavy chain was wrapped around the lid, held in place by a large padlock.

The eyes of the man in the casket, deep black and strangely compelling, were wide open, staring up at us. His gaze was baleful, faintly menacing. His hands were still crossed over his chest, but now there was a barely perceptible rise and fall of the chest.

I saw Gil Holt shiver. "He always spooks me when I see him looking out of the damn coffin! Like a dead man come to life."

Linda laughed mockingly. "That's the name of the exhibit, Gil. 'Buried Alive!'"

I heard the scamper of feet behind me. I glanced around at Juval.

Juval was a dwarf, standing just short of four feet, with stubby, powerful arms and legs. His was a gargoyle's face, always fixed in a grin. He was a deaf mute. When Carl Mercer was out of the pit, Juval was in almost constant attendance, trotting along after the man. Juval had never learned to read

or write. The only way he could communicate was through pantomime, and Mercer was the only person who could interpret his pantomimicry.

Now Juval capered on his short legs, gesticulating. He caught Linda's attention and gestured toward the pit.

She nodded, saying curtly, "Yes, Juval. It's time to get him out now."

Juval bobbed his head and did a jig, leaping high in the air and hitting his heels together. He was carrying a half-empty pop bottle. Every time he had a chance, between his bally appearances for the ten-in-one freak show, he scuttled up to the cook tent for a bottle of cold pop. He set the bottle down now and darted into the shadows at the end of the tent. He was back in a moment with a short-handled spade. Working at amazing speed, he began shoveling the dirt away from the casket.

I watched, fascinated as always. Carl Mercer would die of suffocation within minutes of coming out of the trance unless he was freed from the casket.

I was vague about the particulars. It had something to do with only a few minutes, twenty at the most, of oxygen left at the end of an eight-hour trance. During the trance itself, Mercer's bodily processes almost

ceased, and he consumed only a minimal amount of air. But the instant he came out of the trance, his body functions resumed, and he needed the normal quantity of oxygen.

I knew Mercer worked without a gimmick. The casket was airtight. It wasn't gaffed; there was no gimmick. This fact confounded most of the carnies. They couldn't understand why Mercer worked without a gimmick, especially in an act as potentially dangerous as this one. The first day on any new carnival date, I personally supervised while a group of townies, reputable citizens who had no reason to lie, closely examined both Mercer and the casket. There were always local reporters covering it, and it made for good publicity.

"Aren't you going to help Juval dig him out, Gil?" Linda's voice was taunting.

Gil Holt said harshly, "I didn't hire out to use a shovel."

"Why not? It wouldn't hurt that golden throat of yours."

He glared at her without speaking. I studied the pair, sensing something going on between them.

Linda Mercer was slight, lithe as a whippet, with the purity of beauty of a madonna. Green-eyed, with long golden blonde hair, there was nothing madonna-like about her figure.



A yellow sweater and a tight grey skirt outlined an exciting body.

Gil Holt was new this season with the carnie. He was the front talker, the barker, for the freak show. Around twenty-five, he was young for the job. He was darkly handsome, with a lean and hungry look about him. But he had a good voice and a gift of gab. He was doing a good job with the ten-in-one, pulling the marks in. The freak

show was the carnie's top grosser.

A clod of dirt slipped from Juval's shovel, thudding hollowly onto the half-uncovered casket. The dirge-like sound scraped along my nerves like a file. I shivered and quietly drifted outside.

I paused by the bally platform to light a cigar, looking up the midway toward the smear of light in the carnie night that was the cook tent. The rest of the carnie was dark except for a few bulbs on a light stringer down the middle of the midway. The rides slumbered under their night hoods, and the show tents bulked dark and quiet, banners rolled up for the night. The concession tents were also closed down.

I'm called Patch by the carnies, straight name Dave Cole. I'm the fixer for Tex Montana's Wonder Shows. I'm part lawman, part grease artist. I keep peace among the carnies, which is no easy job, and grease the way with the local authorities in each new location to allow the concession joints to run wide open and the girlie shows to parade the girls in the buff.

I started toward the cook tent, thinking about Carl Mercer, the star attraction and operator of the ten-in-one. Last year, Mercer's first with the carnival, I had watched in his

house trailer as Mercer hypnotized himself into a trance in preparation for his act.

It had been an eerie few minutes. Mercer had stretched out on his back on the couch, with his hands crossed over his chest. At the foot of the couch had been a metronome fixed in the beam of a flashlight. As I watched, Mercer had slipped silently into a deep coma. Two canvasmen had entered the trailer and carried Mercer, stiff as a board, into the freak show tent and placed him in the casket. Then Linda had locked the chain around the glass lid, and Juval had shoveled dirt onto it.

Although I don't have the usual carnie skepticism, I found it hard to believe his act wasn't gimmicked. Magnets in the lid and in the casket itself sealed it airtight when closed, much as a refrigerator door operates. I had seen needles poked into the man's skin without Mercer flinching. I had seen a mirror held to his mouth without a trace of moisture showing. A search for a pulse revealed none. It always took a doctor to find signs of life.

A movement at the tent entrance caught my eye. It was Gil Holt. His face dark and scowling, he strode past me without a word.

I had wondered about Holt

and Linda Mercer. Linda was a desirable woman, married to a much older man, and Gil Holt was a womanizer. I wouldn't have been too surprised to learn of an affair between them.

But Carl Mercer was a jealous, possessive man, and he wouldn't hesitate an instant to throw Linda out if he got even a hint of hanky-panky. And Linda had a good thing going. Mercer was quite well off, and I doubted she would risk losing that money by playing around with some guy. Once a renowned escape artist in the mold of Houdini, Mercer had made a fortune, but something had happened, causing him to lose his nerve. Now he was reduced to the carnie level.

A small figure scooted past me toward the cook tent. It was Juval. That meant that Mercer was out of the pit for the night. I knew Juval was headed for the cook tent for a bottle of pop. He slept on a blanket under the ten-in-one bally platform, and at the end of every engagement his little nest was ringed round with empty pop bottles.

I dropped my cigar onto the ground, toed it out in the wood shavings, and headed toward the cook tent myself. It consisted of a long counter with stools and a number of tables with folding chairs.

It was open to the public, of

course, but its primary purpose was to feed the carnies, those who didn't cook their own meals. After closing each night the cook tent served as a gathering place. Even those carnies who cooked in their trailers or tents usually came in for coffee and pie. They gathered to exchange scuttlebutt and to boast or bemoan the night's grosses.

I flipped my hand in greeting to Kay Foster at the cash register in front and went along the counter, picked up a slab of apple pie and a cup of coffee and found an empty table in the back.

I saw Gil Holt sitting alone at a table in front. When I'd finished my pie and lit a fresh cigar, I glanced his way again and saw with some astonishment that Linda Mercer had joined him. They were talking heatedly in low voices.

I glanced around as Kay approached my table with a cup of coffee. Kay was dark, pretty and discontented with carnie life. We had a thing going. I had once been a practicing attorney, and Kay was always at me to return to private practice. I kept procrastinating. I liked the free and easy life of a carnival Patch.

"Hi, Dave. Got everything buttoned up for the night?"

"Just about, babe."

She sat down and said in a

low voice, "What's with those two?"

"Gil and Linda? Could be they—Oh, oh!"

I broke off as I spotted Carl Mercer entering the tent and striding to the table where his wife sat with Holt. Juval trotted along behind him, the inevitable pop bottle in his hand.

Mercer paused beside Linda's chair. He didn't bother to keep his voice down, every word carrying easily. "I thought you understood our relationship, Holt. In any case I will clarify it now."

"But I—" Holt started to say.

"You work for me as front talker," Mercer swept on. "And that is the extent to which you are involved with my wife and me. Do I make myself clear?"

"No, you don't," Holt blustered. "I don't know what the hell you're talking about!"

Mercer's gaze was level. "I think you do. I think you know very well. There is a line which you do not step over. If you do, I will find myself another front talker."

Holt's show of indignation crumpled under Mercer's penetrating stare, and he looked down at his coffee cup.

Mercer held out his hand. He said imperiously, "Come, my dear."

Linda got up without look-

ing at Holt and went out with her husband, Juval dancing at their heels. Holt sat staring down into his cup. Then he looked up, gaze sweeping the tent as if daring anyone to even look crosseyed. He got to his feet and stomped out.

"You think somethin's going on between those two, Dave?" Kay asked. "Gil Holt and Linda, I mean?"

"I've been thinking about that. Linda's an idiot, if she's fooling around. But then—"

"But then something's always going on with carnies. Right, Dave?"

I changed the subject. "How about a movie, Kay? There's a good one showing in town."

"You're sure you can leave the carnie for that long?" Then she relented, reaching over to touch my hand. "That sounds fine, darling. Soon as I close up the register."

THE CROWD was gathering around the ten-in-one the next night as I walked up. Gil Holt was beginning his last bally pitch of the night. Juval was on the platform, banging on an iron wheel with a hammer and capering on his short legs. Gil Holt, sporty in a bright shirt and dove-colored slacks, marched up and down, chanting into a small microphone cupped in his hand.



"Hi, lookee! Everybody down this way, folks! This is where the freaks are! The strange, the unusual, the weird, the unbelievable! Gather down in close for a free show!"

Holt motioned, and a parade of freaks filed up the short steps and lined up on the bally platform. Ikey, the Tattooed Man, wearing only a loin cloth, every inch of his exposed body, excepting his face, covered with tattoos. Flowers, ships, miniature landscapes, panels of comic strip characters. He flexed a bicep, and a naked woman performed a rippling dance.

Next the Crucified Man, who had small holes bored through his hands. With a hose he shot jets of water through the holes, while the growing crowd stretched, craning necks, and oohed and aahed. Next came Fumo, a tall man in a flaming-red Satan suit complete with horns, carrying two blazing torches. He tilted his head far back, rammed a torch down his throat until it seemed to go out, then removed it and leaned toward the audience, breathing flames like a dragon of olden times.

Gil Holt gestured grandly. "That's enough! After all, we're here to make money. We can't show all our wonders for free, now can we?" He chuckled companionably. "What you see

before your very eyes, ladies and gentlemen, is only a small sample of what goes on inside the tent."

He wheeled and pointed a dramatic finger at the big center banner stretched across the entrance of the tent. The banner depicted the buried casket with Carl Mercer in it, eyes closed, hands folded across his chest. Across the top of the banner were huge letters: BURIED ALIVE!

"This is our main attraction, ladies and gentlemen," Holt said smoothly. "You have to see it to believe it! This man was breathing, eating, living, only short hours ago. Now he is, for all practical purposes, dead. He is not breathing, his heart is not beating. Yet, less than one hour from now, he will return to the land of the living! You have to see it with your own eyes to believe it. So step right up and buy your tickets! No waiting, no delay, the show never stops. It's going on inside right this very minute!"

With a flourish of his hand Gil Holt sent the performers hurrying from the platform and into the tent. Juval gave the wheel a final clang and scampered down the steps. I saw him duck under the bally platform. I knew he wouldn't come out again until time to get Mercer



out. I fired a cigar and watched for a few minutes as people lined up at the ticket-box. They would have a full tent.

I strolled on up the midway, checking on other shows and the rides. A minor crisis held me up at the merry-go-round where a child had fallen off a horse. He wasn't hurt badly, but I had to see that he got medical attention and examined by a doctor. His parents were grateful he wasn't hurt, but I knew from past, sad experience that they could change their minds later and launch a massive law suit.

Consequently it was quite late when I approached the freak tent again. The front was dark, the banners rolled up for the night. It was long past time for Mercer to be out. I started to walk on.

Something made me hesitate, then turn into the tent. It was deserted. I let my glance sweep the empty tent and started to turn back out. Then I stopped short. There was something wrong.

A second glance told me what it was. There was no mound of dirt, no casket in sight. I hurried over to the pit.

Mercer was still sealed in the casket. His eyes were wide and staring sightlessly, his face frozen in a horrible grimace of death. One of his hands was up

by his face. The nails were torn and bleeding.

I could readily see what had happened. He had come out of the trance; there had been no one around to get him out, and he had scrabbled and torn at the coffin lid until the air was all gone, and he had died of asphyxiation.

But where was Juval?

I hurried out of the tent—there was nothing anyone could do now for Carl Mercer—and to the bally platform. I raised the canvas. Juval was sprawled on his back on the blanket, his mouth open and snoring. I shook him, but he was out cold. I leaned down and sniffed. There was no odor of alcohol. It made no sense, no sense at all. There were several empty pop bottles near him. I collected the whole lot and stashed them out of sight in the ticket box.

Two hours later, we were all in the tent, gathered around the open pit. Several of the carnies had dug down, opened the casket and removed Mercer's body. The police had come and gone, taking the body with them.

Just before the police came, Juval had stumbled into the tent. He had rushed to Mercer, a muted cry of anguish coming from him. Then he had scurried to the pit, looked down at the empty casket, and gazed around

at the accusing faces, his small black eyes pleading dumbly for an explanation.

The police had interrogated everyone without getting any pertinent answers. They had tried to interrogate Juval, without any success whatsoever. They had held out little hope they would arrive at any solution, leaving the impression they didn't really care very much. After all this was a carnival; everyone knew carnival people were strange, addicted to weird doings, and here today, gone tomorrow. I was certain they would eventually label it accidental death.

As they took Mercer's body out, Juval had tried to go along, and had to be forcibly restrained.

Now Juval stood at the edge of the pit, gazing down into it, his tiny figure hunched in voiceless grief, as though he expected the nightly miracle to recur and Mercer would rise once again from the dead.

I had questioned Gil Holt and Linda without learning anything. Gil Holt seemed smug, self-satisfied. I had a strong hunch that he was somehow responsible. But I had no proof and saw no chance of getting any. My thought was that he had slipped something into one of Juval's pop bottles, probably sleeping pills. I had told my

suspicious to the officer in charge of the investigation, without naming names. He had ordered all the bottles collected and taken downtown for an examination. Yet I was doubtful of any fruitful results. If Holt had doped Juval's drink, he could easily have disposed of the bottle afterward. He'd have been stupid not to.

The tent began to empty. I waited until the carnies were gone. It was quite late now. I stood for a moment in indecision, looking at Juval's hunched figure. I finally went out and left him alone with his grief.

JUVAL'S vigil beside the open pit continued the next day. All efforts to lead him away had failed. The freak show people brought him food and water; he had refused everything but a little water.

But what outraged the freaks was Linda Mercer's and Gil Holt's decision not only to open the show that evening, but to capitalize on Mercer's death and Juval's vigil.

When I stopped before the tent for the evening's first bally, something new had been added to the front. All Gil Holt had to do to drum up a crowd was point to the new, narrow banner strips pasted across the big center BURIED ALIVE! ban-

ner. The first strip said, "See the pit where the BURIED ALIVE man actually died!". The second said, "See his beloved dwarf continue his sorrowful vigil!"

The crowd's morbid curiosity did the rest. Evidently word had spread among the townies about the strange death of a carnie freak. They fought to get in line at the ticket box. The tent was filled to capacity within minutes.

I followed the stragglers into the tent. The freaks were all on the center platform, but they were getting little attention. The bulk of the crowd was clotted around the pit, threatening to snap the chain. They gazed in hushed awe at Juval, who stood without moving; head bowed, staring down at the open, empty coffin. He gave no indication that he was even aware of the crowd.

I saw Gil Holt standing off to one side, watching with a smug expression. Rage boiled up in me. I stalked over to him. "Around a carnie, you learn to expect almost anything, but this stunt is the rottenest thing I've ever seen!"

Gil Holt smirked. "We're pulling in the loot, ain't we?"

"Holt, as soon as these people get out of here, I want you to close this show down until Mercer's decently buried!"

"You want? Just who are you to be ordering me around?" His eyes narrowed to slits. "Linda turned the show over to me, and tonight's going to be the biggest this nut collection's ever had. And you tell me to slough it? Fat chance, shoo-fly!"

I took a deep breath, calming down. "Okay, Holt, but I have some business with Mrs. Mercer after closing tonight. It's about Mercer's new will. You'd better be there, too."

Gil Holt stared. "New will?"

"That's right. I helped him draw up a new one, and he left it with me. I just read it again. Tell Mrs. Mercer to be in her trailer at twelve."

They were both waiting for me in the Mercer trailer when I arrived just after midnight.

Without preliminaries, Linda said, "What's this Gil tells me about a new will?"

"That's right, Mrs. Mercer. Your husband came to me a few days ago and made out a new will. This isn't an official reading, the will is locked in the office wagon safe. But I thought I should fill you in on a few things. . ."

Linda cut in, "Just get on with it, Patch!"

"All right." I was enjoying myself greatly. "The terms are simple. All of Mercer's estate, with the exception of one dol-

lar to you, Mrs. Mercer, is left in trust to Juval. Although I protested against it, he made me administrator of that trust."

Linda went pale. "Juval! All Carl's money goes to that—"

I continued, "Your husband provided a substantial income for you, Mrs. Mercer—with a stipulation. This income will be paid from the trust only so long as you take good care of Juval. Should you fail to do so, in my judgement, your income will immediately cease. But you see, Mrs. Mercer, your husband did provide for you."

Her lip curled. "Some providing, being stuck with him!"

"There is one other clause of interest. Should Juval predecease you, the trust is terminated and the remainder of the estate then goes to you. I tried to talk him out of inserting that clause."

Gil Holt had been listening closely. Now he said, "He did all this only a few days ago?"

I glanced at him and said with calculated malice, "That's right. I tried to persuade him to reveal the contents of the will to both of you. Had he done so, he could very well be alive right now."

Gil Holt bristled. "Are you accusing me of something?"

Linda gestured sharply. "Shut up, Gil."

"But baby, I—"

She turned on him viciously. "I said shut up!"

They sat glaring at each other, and I grinned openly. I might not be able to prove Holt responsible for Mercer's death, but at least he wouldn't profit from it now, and I had set these two at each other's throats.

I stood up. "I guess I'll leave you two alone now."

Juval's vigil continued for the next two days, and the ten-in-one continued to do a thriving business. I kept a close watch on the freak show. I was amused to see Linda hovering in clucking solicitude around the dwarf. She kept the crowd back from the chain, and once I saw her urging food on Juval, who refused once again.

I lingered behind as the crowd thinned out somewhat, and Gil Holt came into the tent. He plowed past without seeing me and stopped beside Linda. I was close enough to eavesdrop.

"What's with you and the runt, baby?" His laughter was thin. "If I didn't know better, I'd think you had adopted him!"

"Your job's the front end, Gil. You handle that and let me take care of things inside." Her manner was cold, scornful. "You're having a big week. Think of the gross and be happy."

She turned her back and

began talking to Juval in a low voice, pointing to her mouth and wriggling her fingers in front of his face. *My God, I thought, she's trying to communicate with him!*

Holt watched for a moment, then seized her arm and turned her to face him.

"Damn you, after what I did for you! Now it looks like it's all for nothing!" he cried.

"You did nothing for me!" She wrenched her arm out of his grip and slapped him hard. "Now leave me alone!"

Holt's face went white, and I thought he was going to hit her. Then his glance flicked around the tent, and he saw me. Without another word he stormed past me and out of the tent.

I grinned and flipped my hand at Linda and went out. Gil Holt was standing beside the ticket box, smoking furiously. He gave me a look of pure hatred.

I made my rounds until the midway began to close down, then stopped in at the cook tent to pass some time with Kay. I had already decided to return to the ten-in-one after it closed and make a determined effort to lure Juval away from the pit and get some food into him. It was after midnight when I strolled back to the freak show. I toed out my cigar and went inside.

There was very little light in the tent, but enough to show me Juval, still in the same position where I'd last seen him. I walked over, clearing my throat to alert him. I stopped beside him, started to touch his shoulder, then stared down into the pit in shock.

The casket was no longer empty! The lid was down, covered with dirt except for the upper glass, and there was someone in it. For an instant my senses reeled. Had Carl Mercer returned from the dead? It was an eerie feeling.

I stepped closer, peering down, and saw that the figure in the coffin was Gil Holt. His eyes stared emptily, lips drawn back from his teeth. One hand was up before his face, the nails broken and caked with blood where he had clawed at the lid.

He had died horribly, as horribly as had Mercer. What had happened here? Obviously Juval was responsible, but how? He was very strong for his size. Still...

I squatted on my heels before him. His features had smoothed out now, most of the grief gone. I mouthed the words carefully, "What happened, Juval? Can you tell me?"

He understood me. Bobbing his head eagerly, he pantomimed what had taken place, tumbling about, twisting his

supple body into strange positions.

Finally I thought I had the story straight. At least, his version of it. He had been standing in the same spot when Gil Holt crept up behind him and tried to throw him bodily into the casket. But it had ended up the other way, with Holt in the coffin. Then Juval pantomimed closing the lid and shoveling dirt over it. Finally he gave a graphic depiction of the agonies Holt suffered before he died.

I sighed and got to my feet. I took Juval's hand to lead him out of the tent. I expected resistance, but he went along quietly, without even looking back. At the bally platform he reached under for an empty pop bottle, pantomimed drinking from it, then flopped down on the blanket and pretended to fall asleep.

I nodded my understanding. It was as I had suspected all along. His pop had been doped with sleeping pills and he had slept past the time to get Mercer out. Why hadn't he tried to communicate this before? But the more important question was, had he suspected, or known, all along that Gil Holt was responsible? Or had he deliberately provoked the attack

so he could get his revenge? Or had Holt tried to kill him out of frustration over the changed will and Linda's sudden rejection, hoping that he would still get Linda and Mercer's money with Juval eliminated?

Since Juval couldn't answer the questions, I would probably never know the answers. In a way it didn't matter. It seemed to me things had come full circle.

I gripped Juval's shoulder, smiling at him. He beamed, head bobbing, then lay back down. He fell into a sleep of utter exhaustion, even before I dropped the canvas back into place.

The final question remained: what should I tell the local police?

I had no wish to see Juval arrested for murder, and I was sure the other carnies would feel the same way. Likely the investigation would be as casual as before. Our present engagement would end in two more days, and the carnival would be moving on. The police would be happy to have us out of their jurisdiction.

Thinking out what, and how much, I would tell them, I headed toward the office wagon to make the call.

# THE DROP OF A PIN

by

CHRISTOPHER ANVIL

*Her uncle was murdered and  
the door was locked in three  
ways. No one could have done  
it and escaped—could they?*

THE COPPER dazzle of the setting sun on the lake momentarily blinded Richard Verner as the sheriff, at the wheel beside him, turned the car off the road onto a graveled drive that wound beneath tall hemlocks. To their left, a large sign spelled out, "Grove's Lake Cabins." The sheriff braked as he swung to the right, to park in front of a cabin with two large front windows, and two separate front doors, one near





either end of the cabin. Above the right-hand door was a small sign lettered *Office*.

The sheriff shut off the engine, and looked somberly at the cabin.

"Grove's body was in the right half of this double cabin, flat on his back on the bed with a knife through his chest. His niece lived in the left half of the cabin. She reported the murder, and her own story, and the evidence, show that she must have killed her uncle. I've had to take her in. But I don't believe the evidence."

"Why not?"

The sheriff shook his head. "I know people. She didn't do it."

Verner glanced around at the cabins widely spaced beneath the trees, and looked again at the cabin near the car. "Before I do anything, I have to say again, I'm not a detective. You realize that?"

"I know it. You're a—" The sheriff shook his head. "I can't say the word."

Verner said, "Heuristician. It means a specialist at solving problems. I've developed the skill well beyond the usual level, but this isn't the same thing as expert knowledge. I don't want to go near this cabin unless you already have every scrap of useful evidence the cabin will yield."

The sheriff nodded. "One of my deputies is a one-man crime laboratory. He's taken photographs in there from all angles, collected blood, fingerprints, dust, threads, and cigaret ashes, and he doesn't know what to make of half of it, and neither do I. Anything you do with that cabin, short of burning it down, is okay with me."

"Good. Now, tell me again what you said on the phone."

"At about six-fifteen Monday morning, I had a call from Ellen Grove. She said she had just found her uncle dead on his bed, with the door and windows locked. This cabin has a large room and bath in either end, separated by a heavily insulated wall with no door in it. Ellen had promised to wake her uncle early, couldn't rouse him, got worried and used an electric saw to cut through the insulated dividing wall, between the two bathrooms."

"Why did she do that? It sounds crazy."

"You don't know Ellen Grove's uncle. It was the beginning of Grove's busy season. To smash a door or window would have made extra work. All it would take to repair the opening she'd cut would be to put up a small section of insulating board, and meanwhile the damage wouldn't be noticeable."



"When you got here, then, the cabin door and windows hadn't been touched?"

"Right. I went through this opening, found Grove flat on his back on the bed, a knife through his chest, a bump on his head, and blood all over the floor. The knife-wound looked as if it had killed him instantly. There was no note, nothing to suggest suicide, and from the blood and traces of wiped-up blood, it was clear he wasn't on the bed when he was stabbed. It follows, somebody put him there.

"Well, the door was locked and bolted with a safety chain on it, and the windows were all locked from the inside. Standing there looking around, I couldn't help asking myself how the killer got out. By Ellen Grove's own story, she cut through the wall, went into this heavily locked room, and found the body on the bed. No-one else was there. There's the problem, Verner."

"Ellen Grove called you about six-fifteen?"

"Right."

"How did she find out so early that her uncle had been killed?"

"Grove was a very heavy sleeper. He'd asked her to wake him if he wasn't up by five-thirty. She rapped on his door, called, and there was no

answer. There's a doorbell in case a guest gets in late, but it was out of order. She was afraid when she couldn't wake him, wondered how to get in without doing a lot of visible damage, then remembered the electric saw he'd used working on a new cabin."

"There was no opening in the wall until she cut through it?"

"None."

Verner looked thoughtfully at the cabin.

"The left side is Ellen Grove's? The right side belonged to her uncle?"

"Right."

"All the screens are in good condition?"

"Yes. So we know no-one has gone in or out any of those windows."

"Is there any trapdoor, perhaps to service the water pipes?"

"No. That's all taken care of from underneath the cabin."

"The floor solid."

"Very solid. With a heavy layer of insulating board underneath."

"And Grove usually locked his door at night?"

"Always."

"Did he have any enemies?"

The sheriff smiled. "He had more enemies than anyone else I know of around here. I was one, myself."

"Why?" Verner asked.

"He had a flash temper, a tongue like a poisoned dagger, and he would nurse a grudge. Several years ago, he had trouble with a drunk, and called me up just as I was on my way to a pretty bad accident. We were short-handed, and I went to the accident first. Grove never forgave me. He had a lot to say about electing a sheriff and getting an ambulance chaser. He backed my opponent in the last election, and he was backing the fellow they dredged up to run this time." The sheriff shook his head. "Not that anyone could blame him for backing his own cousin, however worthless the—Well, that's beside the point."

Verner sat back, frowning. "What is Ellen Grove like?"

"Quietly pretty, and very hard-working. She's a nice girl."

"She stayed with him all the time?"

"Yes. He was her guardian. Her mother and father were killed in an accident about ten years ago."

"He had no children of his own?"

"No, and these cabins are worth a lot now, she stands to inherit them—and that, you see, provides a motive, especially since she'd wanted to marry a boy who was just drafted, and Grove refused to give permis-

sion. True to form, he had a big fight with the boy, called him all kinds of names, and threw him off the place."

"Where was he when Grove was killed?"

"Two thousand miles away, in an Army camp."

Verner looked at the cabin in silence, his gaze remote and speculative.

"The cabin is solidly built?"

"I've gone over every part of it. The floor and ceiling are solid, and the walls are just as solid."

"Then, the door was locked in three different ways, the windows were locked and the screening intact, and the floor, walls, and ceiling were solid?"

The sheriff nodded.

"What chance is there that as she used the electric saw, the murderer hid in Grove's bathroom—and when Ellen Grove went past into Grove's bedroom, the murderer stepped out through the opening she had made, and left the cabin through her door?"

The sheriff shook his head regretfully. "That was another triple-locked door."

"Do you mean that Ellen Grove, when she brought in the electric saw to cut through the wall, stopped and set the saw down in order to lock the door three times behind her?"

"That's it exactly. You see,

Grove was a fanatic about having doors locked at night. Ellen was worried about cutting through this wall, but she was worried about her uncle. She wasn't thinking too clearly. She remembers setting the saw on a chair by the door of her room, methodically closing the screen door and locking it, just as she would do at night, then closing the inside door and locking the lock, sliding home the bolt, and fastening the chain. And that's how it was when we got here. Exactly the same as in Grove's end of the cabin."

"The screen door, too, was locked from the inside?"

"Didn't I mention that?" said the sheriff. "Yes, both screen doors were locked from inside. There's a little lever inside that moves up and down to work the lock. There's no arrangement for locking them from outside."

"Then we have two locked doors, one behind the other?"

"Right. And another identical set in the other end of the cabin."

"How long was Ellen Grove in her uncle's end of the cabin?"

"Long enough to see what had happened, and to make the phone call."

"Three or four minutes?"

"Yes, I would say at least that long," the sheriff replied.



"Were the shades up or down?"

"Down."

"Did she examine the room?"

"No."

"When she phoned you, she mentioned that the windows were locked?"

"Yes."

"How did she know?"

"When she was outside trying to wake up her uncle, she tried the windows."

Verner nodded. "All right. Let's take a look at those windows first."

THE SHERIFF handed Verner a five-cell flashlight to augment the fast-fading light of day, and, one-by-one, they examined the windows. Each one was covered with screening tightly stapled to the window frame, and painted over along the edges so that

there remained no place not sealed to the frame. Verner closely examined the screening, and the frames around the windows, then walked slowly around the cabin, shining the light over walls finished with clapboards solidly nailed down, and painted dark-green.

He shone the light along the base of the cabin, built on wooden piles set in the ground, with a tight barrier of dark-green wooden strips to keep out animals. At the back, beside a tank of bottled gas, was a loose section of this barrier. Verner lifted it out with a faint tearing sound, to find an opening thickly covered with spider webs.

He walked slowly back to the front of the cabin, to look at the doors. The screen door by the little sign reading *Office* was locked. The sheriff swung the other screen door back, unlocked a plain paneled wooden door, snapped on the light, and they entered a cozily furnished girl's room, where a trace of light perfume lingered in the air.

Verner glanced alertly around, then followed the sheriff through a small dim bathroom, past a tall narrow piece of wallboard leaning against a shower cabinet, through the opening in the bathroom wall, and out through

another bathroom. The sheriff snapped on a light, and Verner was in a room where a large desk sat beside a rack of keys hanging from the wall. There was an old-fashioned safe in the corner of the room to one side of a bed covered with a sheet. On the other side of the bed was a night-table bearing a lamp, a phone, and an alarm clock. Directly above the bed was a doorbell, its two wires running down out of sight behind the head of the bed.

Verner looked at the door. It had the key turned in the lock, and a safety chain fastened so that the door could be opened only so far. On the door was a large bolt, whose end fit not into the usual type of thin-metal fixture but into the curve of a heavy U-shaped rod of steel set into the wood itself.

The sheriff said drily, "That door is locked."

Verner examined it closely, to see a slight gouge in the wood, where the bolt passed through the steel U. He slid the bolt back and forth, and it hissed lightly against the steel but didn't touch the wood.

The door was painted a light cream color, and was old-fashioned, very plain, with thicker sections of wood between the panels. These thicker sections crossed the door from one side to the

other, like the rungs of a ladder, and were square-edged, without trim or beveling of any kind.

"This door," said Verner, "is an inside door, isn't it?"

"Yes. That came from a house that was torn down when they put the new highway through. You see, with that highway, we expected tourists. Grove bought the doors and windows from the house and used them when he built the cabins."

"This is lighter than a regular outside door?"

"It's lighter weight. To do justice to that bolt, Grove should have had a solid oak door. But, that door wasn't broken down. It tells us nothing."

Verner shook his head. "Look at the dent in that wood just back of the place where the bolt slides into the U."

The sheriff bent to study the spot, slid the bolt carefully back and forth, and straightened up, frowning.

Outside, there was a crunch of tires on gravel.

The sheriff murmured, "A tourist, probably. I'll go out, and—"

Outside, there was the rapid click of a parking brake, then the slam of a car door. A rough male voice shouted, "Anybody home?" There was the sound of heels on gravel, a brief silence,

and then a hammering on the other door of the cabin.

The sheriff growled under his breath, reached out to unbolt the door, but Verner stopped him, to speak in a whisper.

"Grove's cousin?"

"Himself. How did you know?"

"If what I think is true, two minutes alone in here will give him the perfect crime. But the only safe way for him to get in is to come when you're here, and decoy you outside."

"You want him kept out?"

"No. Don't tell him anyone else is here. Let him in by the other door, and give him time to get into this side of the cabin. Then come back in and shout to him to come out."

Outside, there was a jaunty whistle, a crunch of heels on gravel, then a shout. "I want to get out of the road here and park. I'll be right back."

There was the roar of an engine, a whine of tires and a rattle of gravel, then the metallic bang-crash of one car slamming into another.

"Damn!" cried the voice. "You were in my way!"

The sheriff swore under his breath. "Can't even drive and he wants to be sheriff." He walked toward the other side of the cabin.

Verner followed into the

dimly lighted bathroom, stepped into the shower cabinet and pulled the plastic curtain along its rod so that nearly all of the shower was visible except where he stood. Then he waited.

From outside came a loud complaining voice. "You were parked crooked!"

"Crooked?" came the sheriff's voice, thick with anger. "Do you think this is a parking lot? Can't you watch where you're going? Where did you hit it?"

"Doesn't look like there's any damage done! Or if there is, I'm good for it. You check her over. I've got to get some stuff Ellen wants."

There was the sound of the cabin door opening, then rapidly approaching heavy footsteps, the sound of hoarse breathing just behind Verner, then the opposite side of the shower stall lit up briefly as a light shone quickly around the bathroom. The sheriff called from outside, "Where are you?"

There was a brief grunt, then the heavy footsteps went into Grove's room.

There was a moment's quiet.

Verner stepped softly out, to glance into the room.

At the front door of the cabin, he saw a squat figure in a worn hunting jacket at the door's lower edge.

Silently, Verner stepped into the room behind him.

In the other end of the cabin, the sheriff called angrily, "Come out of there!" The sheriff's purposeful stride grew suddenly loud.

Verner watched as a small hammer disappeared into the hunting jacket. From the rough figure came a little chuckle, a quick "Yes, sir!" and then the man shot back the bolt, twisted the key in the lock, and snapped the chain free.

Verner blocked the bathroom door with his foot, and threw his weight against it, holding it shut despite the other man's advantage in leverage. There was a rough intake of breath, and Verner was looking into a pair of eyes that glinted with cunning.

Across the room, the sheriff shouted, "Hold it! What's this?"

The squat figure gave a sudden powerful wrench at the door, jerked it partly open, leaned outside, and then abruptly he was back in the room, glaring triumphantly.

"If I want, I'll go out! All right, who are you? What are you doing here?"

Verner stepped back from the door, very slightly stooped, his motions relaxed and somehow suggesting the movement of a big cat.

There was a brief tense hesitation.

At the door, the porcine figure stepped back, fists balled.

Verner's hand shot out, to slam home the bolt.

Verner said, "He took the hinge pins out and replaced them. He just threw them outside. You might as well arrest him for the murder of his cousin."

IN THE BEAMS of the parked sheriff's cars, the deputy handed back a piece of shining metal, similar to a large nail, but less pointed on the end. The deputy shook his head.

"He must have rolled that one in his hand when he threw it. There was oil on it, and about half his right thumb print." The deputy frowned as he looked at the hinge-pin. He cleared his throat, but the sheriff spoke first, to Verner, his tone crisp and confident.

"All right, we'll go back inside, and see if this checks out."

They entered Grove's side of the cabin, and the sheriff shut the door firmly. With an odd expression on his face, he looked at the hinge-pins. He glanced at the door, then at Verner.

"This may be clear to you. But what good did it do him to change the hinge-pins?"





"You remember the little dent in the wood under the U-shaped receiver?"

"Yes. I don't see how it got there. The bolt slid past it without touching, and that U would protect it from being bumped."

"Suppose the bolt did make that mark? What would that mean about the position of the door?"

The sheriff touched his chin. Suddenly his eyes widened.

"The hinge side of the door would have been away from the door frame, and lock side against the frame . . . The door would have been partly turned on that bolt as if the bolt were the hinge!"

"And what," said Verner, "would that say about the hinges?"

The sheriff glanced at the door, which had the standard type of butt hinges. Each hinge was made in three parts—a vertical pin which served as a pivot, and two separate metal plates, one attached to the door, and the other to the doorway. Each plate bore curving pieces of metal which clasped the pin. With the pin removed, the plates would come apart.

The sheriff shook his head. "I've been looking at the wrong edge of this door."

He unlocked the door, took

out a big pocket knife, and, using the screwdriver blade of his knife, worked loose the pins, which were somewhat thicker than the others, and less shiny, with blunt ends. He called a deputy, and dropped out the pins in a box.

"Check these for prints, just in case."

He set the lock side of the dismounted door near the lock side of the frame, and steadying the door with one hand, connected the safety chain, pushed the bolt all the way out, and turned the key in its lock so that the lock bolt slid out. He lifted the door by the wooden crosspieces, eased it into the doorframe, the bolt sliding into its U-shaped rod, the lock-bolt sliding into its hole, and the chain, already fastened, clinking against the door. The hinge-halves bumped together, the sheriff worked the door slightly up and down, and first the lower and then the upper hinge slid together.

"Now," said the sheriff, "we need to have the hinge-pins in. Since they fit in straight up-and-down, they'll drop of their own weight, if they're held upright just in the top of the hinge, and if they're ground down a little and oiled, like the pins that were in this door. But, how could he hold them upright on the inside while he

was outside working the door back into place? . . . Let's see . . . Yes, a little thread would do it, looped around the hinge-pin and tacked outside the door."

The sheriff took the hinge-pins, held each in turn at the top of its hinge, and released it. Each dropped partly into place, then stopped. He worked the door back and forth, then lightly rapped it with his fist. The hinge-pins dropped into place. He unlocked and opened the door, took the bedside lamp on its long extension cord, and carefully examined the hinge side of the doorframe.

"Look."

Verner saw a tiny hole, above and outside of each hinge, made apparently by a pin or tack.

They examined the screen door, to find a little vertical groove in the wood at the top of the door, directly above the lock lever, and a corresponding groove at the bottom of the door directly below the lock-lever.

"A piece of strong Nylon thread," said the sheriff, "wound around that lock lever, and run out the top of that screen door, and the other end run out the bottom, would do it. If he drew on both ends of the cord, the thread would hold tight around the lever. He could

pull down from outside the door, and lock the lock. Then if he let go one end of the thread, and pulled on the other, the thread would slip free and slide out. The same with those hinge-pins. Once he was outside, all he had to do was to hold one end of the thread, and let go of the other end. The hinge pin would drop down partly into place, the thread would slip free, he could rattle the door a little to work the pin down all the way, and the door would be locked, with him outside."

The sheriff grinned suddenly, and looked at Verner. "Now that you've got it worked out, I can explain it. Now, let's try it, from outside. Here, you start these pins, after the door's in place."

This time, the sheriff stepped outside past the opened hinge side of the door, gripped it by the crosspieces, drew the door into its frame from outside, rapped it lightly and repeatedly to drop the hinge-pins into place—and the door was locked from inside, while he stood outside.

He came back in, smiling. "Now we know how, but not why. They were cousins, and Grove was backing him. Why would he kill Grove?"

Verner shook his head. "You know the people, and I don't.

But you say Grove had a flash temper, and could be a bitter enemy. I'd guess Grove was mad at him, or he expected Grove was soon going to be mad at him."

The sheriff nodded.

"There was talk he'd been behind in his mortgage payments, but he straightened that out. If Grove lent him the money and he couldn't pay it back—" The sheriff shook his head. "There was one man you never wanted to owe money to unless you paid it back on the dot."

"He was Grove's closest relative after Ellen Grove?"

"Yes."

"Then," said Verner, "at one blow, he could eliminate Grove; very possibly eliminate Ellen Grove as the person who would inherit Grove's property—since she was likely to discover the body, and be the apparent murderess; clear up his own money troubles; and possibly, if the trial went badly, strengthen himself politically at your expense. But that's only a guess."

The sheriff opened the door and called to his deputies, who brought in the squat dejected figure, eyes downcast, shambling. The deputies, however, were alert and wary.

The sheriff nodded toward a chair. His voice was soft. "Let

him sit there. As long as he doesn't do anything, keep your hands off him."

"Sheriff, I think we need handcuffs."

"I don't. Okay, Eb, what happened here?"

The dejected face looked up, eyes squeezed shut. Abruptly the eyes opened, and blazed.

"He called me 'Corkscrew.'"

He said I'd pay him the money, or he'd make me the joke of the county. 'Corkscrew for Sheriff—Always in the liquor and as crooked as they come! Vote for Corkscrew!' I don't know what happened to me. I took a swipe at him and missed. He slipped, and hit his head on that rail at the foot of the bed there. He came up with that knife in his hand, and said, 'So long, Corkscrew,' and the next thing I remember, I'd finished him.

"I stood there looking down at him, and I started for the phone, and then it hit me nobody would believe my side of it. That's when I saw those hinge-pins laying on the bed. I was in a daze. But I thought I saw how I could fix it so no one could get blamed, since no one could have gotten out."

The sheriff said mildly, "How did the hinge-pins get there? You mean, Grove had put them there?"

"He threw them there. He's complained that this door here

gets rusted with the dampness over the winter, or the pins are too tight, or there's something wrong, because at the start of the season, it squeaks, and he never gets around to oiling it. When I couldn't raise the money to pay him, I tried to think of something to take the edge off his temper—you know how he was—so maybe he'd listen and give me a little more time.

"I thought, he's always complaining about those squeaky hinges, maybe it will get him in a better mood if I fix them. Well, I came in and smiled, and I said, 'I brought you something to fix those squeaky hinges,' and he looked at the hinge-pins, and he looked at me, and he tossed the pins aside and said, 'That will keep. Let's have the money.' Well—you know the rest."

After the deputies and their prisoner had gone out, the

sheriff glanced toward Verner.

"What do you think? According to that story, it's self-defense."

Verner shook his head. "I'd check to see if those oiled hinge-pins left any mark on the bedspread. What do you think?"

"There was a little oil on that bedspread. What I think is that we'll have a hung jury between those that want to send him up for life, and those that want to give him a vote of thanks for doing what they felt like doing themselves. Well—Ellen's out of it, and we've got the actual killer. You still say you aren't a detective?"

Verner shook his head. "I'm not a detective."

The sheriff smiled. "I don't know anyone better qualified to be one. I give you an impossible triple-locked door. And you hand me back an open-and-shut case!"



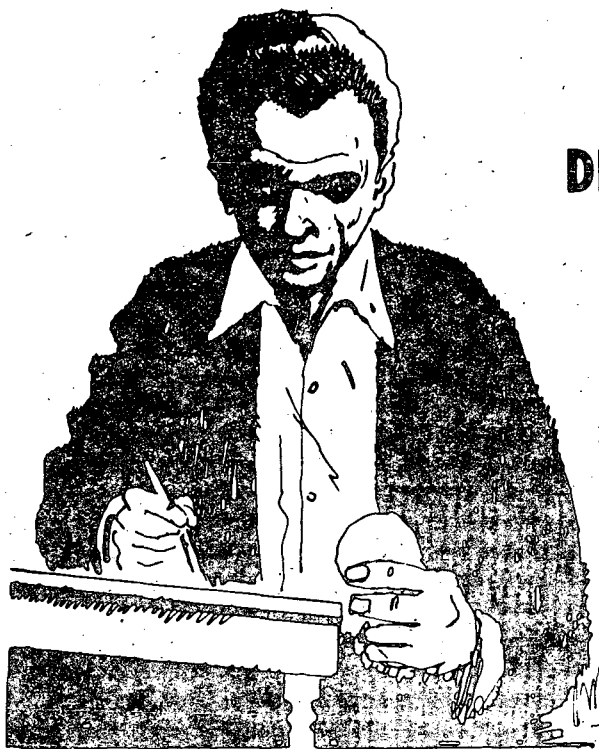
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## ATTENTION—WESTERN FANS

*Have You Met MIKE SHAYNE'S Frontier Companion?*

**ZANE GREY WESTERN MAGAZINE**

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## DEAR MAMA

by  
PAULINE  
C.  
SMITH

*She understood his loneliness, away from his mother,  
but she shouldn't have interrupted his lunch hour walk.*

DEAR MAMA:

You were right. I know that now. I know I should never have come here. Remember the day you said, "Don't go, son, you will only regret it." You were right, Mama. I do regret it.

I was deaf to your words because of the people at the office.

They had never been friendly before. After all those years. They even clapped me on the back and called me "Vince" and told me I should go. They said it was the chance of a lifetime.

Mama, when Mr. Hammill first explained the need for a top accountant at the Home Office, and how he had recom-

mended me, of course I was flattered, but I certainly didn't think about it seriously. I just thanked him for his faith in me and went back to work. It was only when everybody crowded around, calling me "Vincé," which they had never done before, telling me how they would give their eyeteeth for a chance to transfer with a big raise. Telling me to go.

Mama, they made it seem so wonderful, so great. But it hasn't been either. This is a strange and terrible city and everyone is cold and distant at the office, not like the people in the office back home where they were friendly, at the last anyway, calling me "Vince" and telling me to go.

That apartment I lived in was awful, Mama. You know I am used to a great big house, with you always there... The partment was one big room with a tiny kitchen and a small b.r. A couch folded out in the big room to make a bed. I have not had a decent night's sleep since I have been in this city—all during those months in the apartment, and these weeks in Carol's house. You would think, with my own room in Carol's house like I used to have at home, I could sleep, but I cannot.

It was the house, I think, Carol's house, that made me do

what Carol wanted me to do. I don't think I would have otherwise, Mama, even if she was the only person at the office who was nice to me, and lonely too, as she told me so many times.

A lonely old maid, she called herself, and then she told me she was thirty-six, one year younger than I, but that was after she first called me "Vincent" instead of "Mr. Nugent," so I know she read the personnel file on me or how would she know my name was Vincent and that I was thirty-seven? I am pretty sure she is forty-something, not that that makes any difference, but I just don't like a liar.

I didn't think of that then. I am thinking about it now.

Carol worked in the File Department and almost always, if I needed something from the files, she brought it to me in my own office. I have an office of my own, Mama, here in the Home Office, but that doesn't help.

I didn't even notice her for a long time. You know how I work, Mama, diligently and with concentration. When she brought me a file, she always said, "here you are, Mr. Nugent," and I said, "thank you," without looking at her and went back to my work.

She didn't call me "Vincent,"

until after we ate next to each other in the cafeteria. Mama, this Home Office is so big that there is even a cafeteria for the employees, which I did not frequent, preferring instead, to get out in the air and walk, eating my milk chocolate bar on the way, even though these city streets are hemmed in by tall buildings with the air filled with smog.

But the day I sat next to Carol, or rather, she found a seat next to me, it was raining torrents so, rather than walk in it and take a chance on catching cold, I went to the cafeteria for the first time, and as soon as I had sat down with my milk and bread pudding (the only decent things offered) she came, with her tray, and sat next to me.

Mama, she had to tell me who she was before I even knew her. She had to explain that she was Carol, the file clerk, who brought me the files I needed, and before I had finished my lunch and was ready to go back to my office, she had called me "Vincent" and said she was a lonely old maid of thirty-six, a year younger than I, which certainly proves to me that she had been reading my personnel file. I didn't think about that then. I guess I was just grateful for her friendliness and my name.

She got to asking me, when she brought the files to my office that I had asked for, if I would be going to the cafeteria for lunch. She said she wanted to know and she would save a place for me next to her, although I explained to her that, unless the weather was inclement, which it all too often was during those late winter days (the "rainy season" they call it here) that I much preferred to walk.

That being a mistake on my part, my telling her that I walked, because she intercepted me one noon hour at the lower doorway and said she liked to walk too, which was very disconcerting. As you know, there is only one person with whom I care to take a walk... remember our walks, Mama, back home? How we kicked the fallen poplar leaves in the autumn and laughed together to see them dancing along the wide sidewalks—and in the spring we planned, as we walked, the flowers we would plant in the garden? By now, I suppose, the bridal wreath has bloomed and fallen, the tulips and crocus are dormant, and the roses, full-bloomed and heavy on the bush, wilt in the hot summer sun.

Mama, I didn't want to leave and come here, except the people in the office back there were so friendly, at the last, calling me



"Vince" and telling me to go. I am very lonely and don't know what to do.

Well, Carol, here, was the only friendly one.

After all this time, I cannot describe her. I suppose I could go to the back bedroom and open the door and look. But I don't want to do that either.

During one of our noontime walks, with her doing all the talking and me surreptitiously nibbling my milk chocolate bar, she told me about her house, and I am afraid that the idea of a house rather excited me after my one big room with the tiny kitchen and the b.r. in which I felt stifled, I must have imagined her house as being somewhat like ours back home—old, large and impressive, set in the shade of towering trees, especially since she said that the house had belonged to her parents, and now to her after their death.

But the house was not like that at all. Mama, you would never believe the way things are out here—everything new and gaudy and brash. I hope you come in answer to this letter, not so much to see the way things are, but to help me. I need your help, Mama, I need it greatly.

Carol drew a map of how to get out to her house. You need maps here all the time, Mama.

You need a map to turn around. My big room with the tiny kitchen and b.r. was quite close to the office, but Carol lived out in what she called the suburbs. She invited me to her house on a Saturday, "Start early," she said gaily, "so you have enough time to get lost in." Well, I don't think there is any gayety in getting lost, but I didn't say as much.

You would have to see the freeways to believe them, Mama. There are signs up in the center with arrows that all point downward to show you which way to go, and if you are not accustomed to these signs, which I certainly was not, it is very easy to miss the freeway you are supposed to go on, so that you get off on another freeway, and a map doesn't do you much good.

I have never had such an awful time in my life as I did on those freeways that Saturday—well yes, I guess the time right now is more awful. I do hope you come, Mama, and help me out.

I didn't arrive at Carol's house until dusk after driving those freeways all day! But even in the dusk I could see that the house was not as I had imagined it, on a street with a lot of other houses on it. I remember the streets back home, especially ours—big,

broad avenues, lined with poplars, the houses set back in wide lawns. Mama, I get so choked up with emotion just remembering that it is difficult to go on with this letter, but I shall. . .

I haven't seen an old house, I mean an elegant old house, gabled, columned and pilastered, since I have been here. They tear down the old things and put up new atrocities. When I mentioned that fact, Carol said that her house certainly was old, twenty years old! I would have offered a sardonic chuckle at that had I not been a bit cross after all the freeway difficulties.

Remember how it was when I got cross at home, Mama? You always knew and always had a roguish remark to make. "My boy's feathers have been ruffled, but I have just the right thing to oil them," then you crossed the flowered Aubusson in the dining room and poured me a wineglass of sherry. Mama, you always knew the right thing to say and the right thing to do. I should never have left home.

I told Carol about home that night, Mama—about the velvet lawns, the clipped hedges, the old carriage house we use as a garage, and how the house always smelled of lemon furniture polish. . . and I don't think

she understood, but she listened carefully and I believe she finally realized that her modern house, which she has further modernized, even to installing air conditioning, was but a crass affectation to me.

I am glad now, however, for the air conditioning which, fortunately, is quite efficient.

That night, Mama, was a strange one. I never should have gone to that house, such a small excuse for the one I grew up in and love, but so much larger than one big room, a tiny kitchen and b.r. in which I lived here, so that I found myself reminiscing and weeping softly. Carol said that I was lonely and she propped pillows behind my head on the couch and made me hot lemonade—remember, like you used to do when I caught a bad cold and my sinuses hurt?

Since it was late spring by then and quite warm and I didn't have a cold and my sinuses were not clogged, it must have been an incident of reminiscence that she was replaying to make me feel less lonely. She even turned the air conditioning up high while I drank the hot lemonade so that the cold air would tend to minimize the heat of the lemonade, which lulled me off to sleep—probably from exhaustion after being lost on those strange freeways.

When I awakened, it was just short of midnight and Carol asked how I expected to drive back to my room on the freeway with all the confusion of night lights when I couldn't even do it during daylight? Then she suggested that I sleep in the back bedroom (where she is now) and I thought it the better part of valor to do so—but now I think I should have risked limb and life on the freeway. . . .

Mama, I wish I had listened to you instead of those late friends at the office back home who called me "Vince" and told me to go.

There was no lock on the back bedroom door, so I spent a wakeful night, but no more so, I suppose, than all those nights spent on my fold-down bed in my big room.

Carol has only one b.r., which is located toward the front of the house next to her bedroom (but not the bedroom she is now in), which was rather embarrassing not knowing whether or not she might be in the b.r. when I might wish to enter it.

She prepared a nice breakfast that next morning, except she soft boiled the eggs four minutes and you know I like mine boiled four and a half minutes *exactly*. The toast was all right, but she served jam instead of marmalade and orange juice

instead of fresh tomato juice.

She said maybe we ought to get married, two lonely people like us, and we weren't getting any younger, and she had the house which was clear and paid for.

I don't know what got into me, Mama, but I guess I went into what you used to call one of my "whimsical moods", and told her I never could marry a woman who boiled my eggs for only four minutes and didn't serve marmalade and tomato juice. I can't remember all my easy banter now, but I went on with it for quite some time, and I will never understand how it came about that she started to plan our wedding!

A lot of the rest of it is blanked out of my mind—practically *all* the rest of it, including all these weeks from that spring morning to this summer day. I seem to recall her leading me back to my room in her car while I followed in mine so that I would learn the right on-ramps and off-ramps and freeway switches. As she said, and I do remember this quite clearly, "After I quit my job and we are married, you will have to learn to negotiate this freeway alone."

Mama, every morning when I arrive at work, my hands are so wet with nervous perspiration and shake so violently

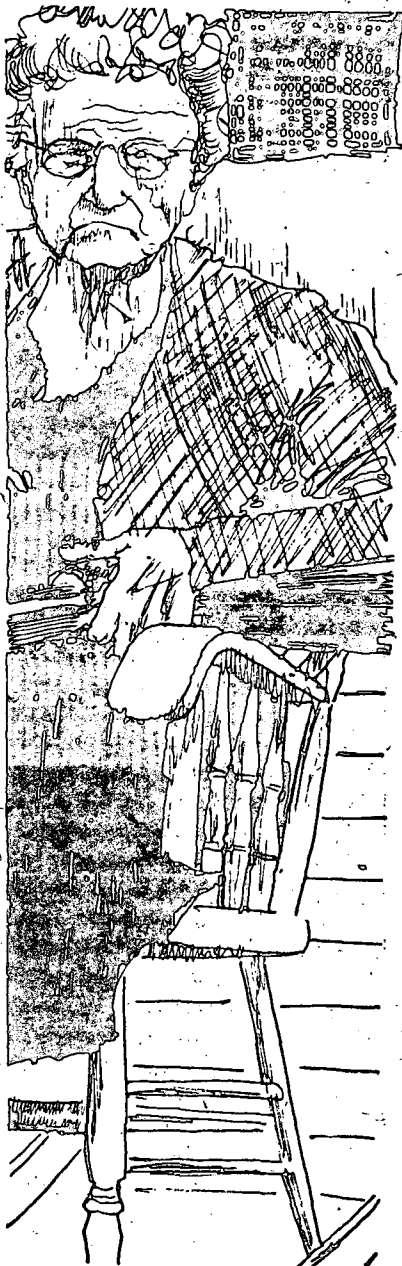
from freeway fear that when my finger does manage to hit the correct calculator key, it slips off—and every evening when I arrive at Carol's house, I am aquiver with tense fatigue.

I am very tired.

I explained to Carol that I desired a life of simple culture, the kind of life you gave to me, Mama. I suppose I did suggest, a number of times, that she change her way of doing things to conform more to yours; that she attempt to cook the wonderful dishes you always prepared for me. . .

But, Mama, Carol did not seem to aspire to a life of simple culture. She wanted something shockingly different. I have explained, many a night during these last weeks, at the door of the back bedroom after she had broken down the chair I placed under the knob, how she should act and in what ways she should change. I explained simple culture to her, patiently, Mama, and considerately. . .

And then, last night at the back bedroom door, she interrupted my careful explanation with such a degradingly scandalous remark about you, my sainted Mama, one that I cannot and will not repeat, that I lost control and reacted automatically. I am not, ordinar-



ily, a violent man, you know that, Mama, something simply snapped and that is the reason she is now in the back bedroom with the air conditioning turned high, and I need you, Mama, with the desperation of a lost and lonely son.

Now here is what I want you to do, Mama, as soon as you receive this letter, I want and hope that you will take a plane out here to me so that you can decide what we must do about Carol. I will be right here in Carol's house, for this is my summer vacation from the office and it is very hot, but with the air conditioning turned high in the back bedroom, I am sure Carol will keep. I haven't looked in there to see, of course. I am waiting for you.

As soon as I finish this letter, I shall take it out to the corner box and airmail it to you. When you arrive at the airport here, Mama, you can get a cab and direct the cab driver to the address on the corner of this envelope. Those cab drivers can find anything, and as you know, from what I have written

you, freeway driving shatters me—but even so, Mama, I would gladly meet you at the airport except that I must stay here. Someone must be here constantly—you understand that—it is not that my loyalties are divided, *they are not*.

Mama, I am terribly lonely. All I want out of life is to return home with you—*after*, of course, you have decided what it is we are to do with Carol.

Mama, even if you did tell me not to write to you once I was gone after choosing to leave your room and board...those were your very words, Mama...still, I have started many letters to you. This one I am finishing and this one I must send.

Now, Mama, you know about taking the plane and getting the cab and coming out here to the return address on the envelope. I do hope you will come, Mama, because I will be waiting here with the air conditioning turned high in the back bedroom.

Your loving son,  
*Vincent*



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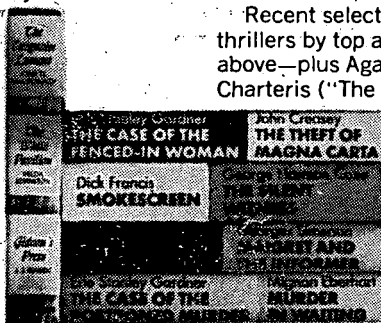
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